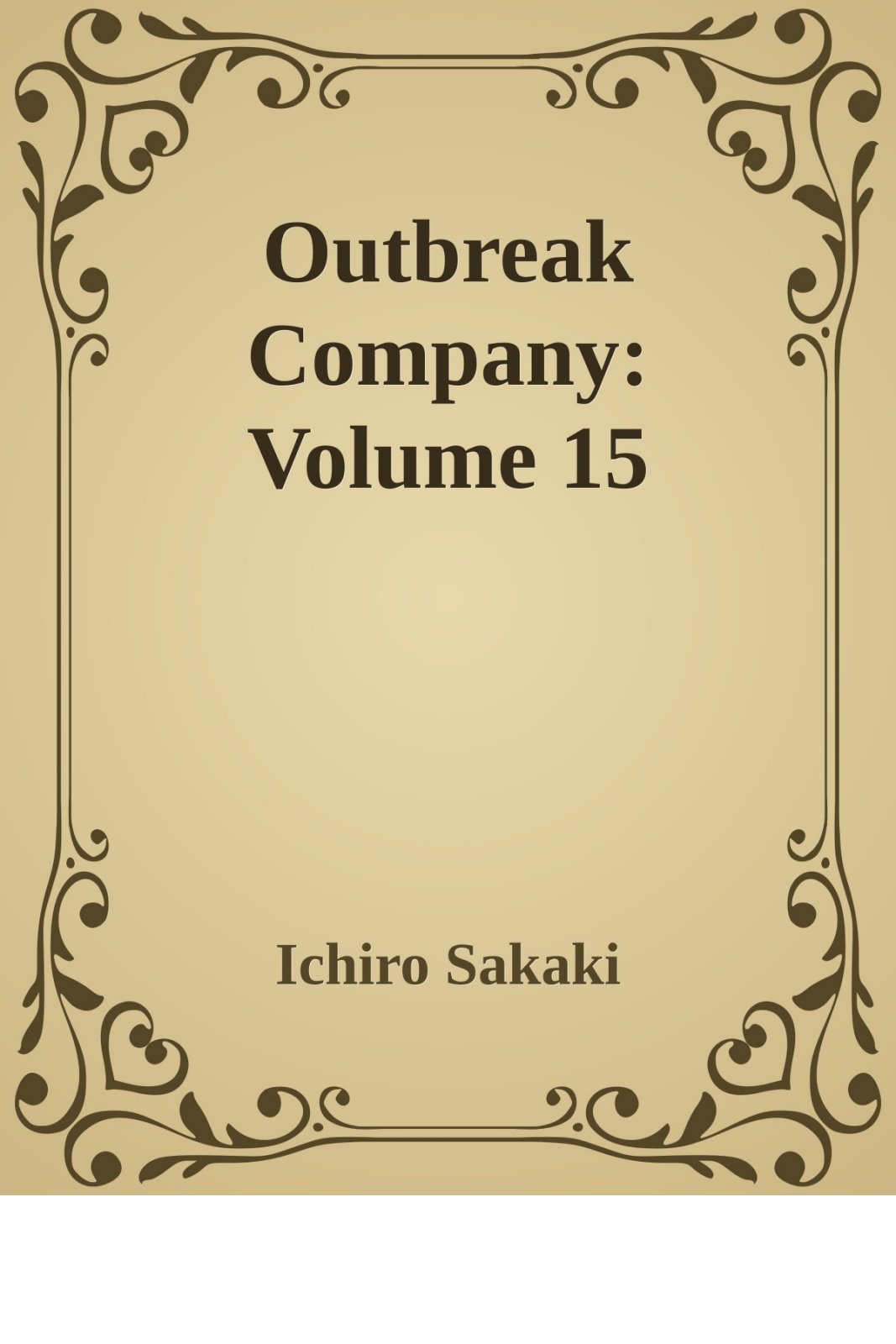


A decorative border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns in a dark brown color, framing the central text.

Outbreak Company: Volume 15

Ichiro Sakaki

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Outbreak Company

THE POWER OF MOE

15

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Illustration Yuugen

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THE POWER OF MOE

15



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*SHE
WAS CLEARLY
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*THEN THE
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Prologue

The Third Capital had changed much in the two years since I had seen it last.

“I can’t believe it...”

Every place in our Kingdom of Bahairam was developing quickly; it was no surprise that the scenery should change. For example, the way I remembered the Third Capital, much earlier, was as a crude place, with mud-and-brick longhouses the only thing that passed for buildings, and those packed eave to eave as far as the eye could see. Our capital had no massive, imposing castle like that in the Eldant Empire, nor any elegantly appointed shops. What I remembered was a city that embodied our nation’s roots as a nomadic people, a town of simple but sturdy buildings.

But over the course of more than ten years, the Kingdom had allocated much of its resources to rapid development, including inviting scientists and engineers from every field to visit us from abroad. We became better builders than we had been before, and now towering structures of five full stories and more lined the main thoroughfare as if to create a wall of buildings. Steel superstructures and the use of concrete had made them stronger, allowing us to add more floors. We owed that to dwarven engineers from other countries.

All of this meant that now, the longhouses I remembered were very much the exception rather than the rule. Walking down the street, the close-packed buildings on every side made me feel like I was at the bottom of a valley.

That, however, was how I had felt two years ago as well. The striking thing was that these buildings, the towering signs of Bahairam’s advancement, now showed obvious wear. Cracks ran along the walls, and some of the structures were tilting slightly. There was nothing that appeared openly derelict, but what had once been an organized, regular line now seemed to waver and twist in places.

What in the world had happened? What could have caused those brand-new buildings to seemingly age a century in just a couple of years?

“Elder Sister?”

Clara must have noticed me frowning at the scenery. She remained as expressionless as ever, but I detected a hint of confusion in her voice. She must have been harboring the same questions as I

was about the state of the city.

"It's nothing. It appears something damaged the buildings."

"Yes, ma'am. That'd be the quakes," said the soldier walking a few steps in front of us. He was a human man, still young, his rank lower than mine or Clara's. He was attached to the local garrison in the Third Capital, and was currently leading us to General Headquarters, where we would make our report.

"Quakes? As in, earthquakes?" I furrowed my brow. It was an unusual word. I knew what it meant well enough, but it didn't quite seem real—just a concept in my mind.

"Yes, ma'am. The whole ground shakes. Quick, nonstop flutters," the soldier said to us over his shoulder. "You can be standing on solid ground and it's like you're riding in a dino-drawn carriage."

"The *ground* shook..." Clara cocked her head. She probably found it hard to imagine. Well, so did I. The ground was made of solid stone. If it moved and shook, then you could never build a house on it. But then, maybe that was what made the cracked, tilting buildings stand out so starkly.

"They've gotten more common this last year or so. Those of us who live here have started to get used to them," the young man said with a rueful smile.

"So this isn't an isolated occurrence?" That was a surprising fact. The land on which the Third Capital had been built wasn't likely to have been subject to common seismic activity. The dwarves who had helped us construct these huge buildings would have known better than to build in such a place. If any of the massive structures were to collapse, it would be a tragedy.

So the earth had suddenly started shaking in the last year or so, but what could be causing it? True, sometimes there was simply no accounting for natural disasters, but still...

"Most of them end quickly enough," the young soldier said with the easy tone of someone accustomed to the experience. "Though we do find ourselves spending a lot of time repairing buildings."

"And it seems you haven't quite caught up yet," I said, eyeing an especially large gouge in the wall of a building we were walking past. Evidently it had been deemed not critical enough to warrant immediate attention; someone must have felt there was no danger of the building collapsing right away. I didn't know how it had been when this all started, but it seemed people were used to the earthquakes enough by now that they no longer felt immediately threatened by them.

As for me, I was anxious, though I would have been hard-pressed to explain why. Without any sense of why the earthquakes were happening, we had no way of knowing if they might start to happen

more often or less, on a greater or smaller scale, or with heightened or reduced intensity. Soldiers are typically trained to prepare for the worst, but for some reason, maybe those here in the Third Capital hadn't been.

Or perhaps...

The Third Capital had one special feature no other capital city had. In addition to the garrison and the usual contingent of soldiers, it was home to a special, elite unit known as the Undertakers. I had heard they were quite influential in this city. Perhaps they were guiding municipal policy, on their own authority and their own responsibility. Considering that they reported directly to the honored father-ruler, it would be difficult for the bureaucrats to countermand them.

My thoughts were interrupted by an angry shout.

"I told you, say whatever you like, I can't help you!"

I stopped and turned in the direction of the voice. "Hmm...?"

Several large bird-drawn carriages were parked at a fork in the road. The big, ash-gray birds yoked to them, as well as the design of the vehicles themselves, made it clear that they were not from Bahairam. A convoy of foreign merchants, I supposed.

Bahairam's rapid development had led to far more frequent visits from foreigners. Merchants tended to be a ruthless lot, not choosy about their business partners so long as there was money to be made, and of late they had been lining up at our door from every nation. Even businessmen from our long-standing enemy, the Eldant Empire, had allegedly begun to be admitted. (They worked through a third, unrelated nation as an intermediary so their behavior wouldn't look like treason to the Eldant authorities.)

The very fact that trade was publicly outlawed simply meant that the flow of people and goods was severely curtailed, which further meant that if one could corner the market, there were scads of profit to be had. Hence why the Eldant merchants were so eager to conduct trade with Bahairam.

A name was displayed prominently on the side of several of the carriages: "Faugron & Associates." I knew it; it was a prominent merchant house in the Eldant Empire, one supposedly led, most unusually, by an elf.

Demi-humans in the Eldant Empire, including elves and dwarves, along with werewolves and lizardmen, largely occupied a social stratum somewhere below the human population, but if they did well enough for themselves in some endeavor, they might be acknowledged for it; could even aspire to something like nobility. I seemed to remember that the founder of Faugron & Associates had been just such an exceptional elf.

“Looks like some kind of argument,” Clara said, her ears up and twitching. It looked like she was right: a detachment of Bahairamanian soldiers was engaged in a verbal shoving match with several elves I took to be with Faugron. I noticed, too, that the crest on the soldiers’ uniforms was different from that of the young man showing us around.

“The Undertakers,” he remarked. “It’s the security unit from the Dragon’s Den.”

The Dragon’s Den was what they called the military facility at the heart of the Third Capital. It was run by the Undertakers themselves, and from it they reported directly to the father-ruler, rather than going through General Headquarters. The existence of the Dragon’s Den was what made this city unusual. In fact, it could be said that the Third Capital had been located here not because it was convenient in view of the tendency to periodically move the site of the capital city, but because of the presence of the Dragon’s Den. That facility had contributed greatly to Bahairam’s development, and was an important, perhaps *the* most important, building in our country.

That was why the Undertakers, even if their basic unit structure was the same as everyone else’s, did things differently from the rest of the military, operating outside the typical chain of command. They had originated as a royal guard for the father-ruler, and they never let anyone forget it. This, I had heard, was a point of friction with the rank-and-file soldiers, and indeed when our guide spoke of them, he sounded distant, even contemptuous.

But none of that was what interested me at that moment.

“Who is that...?” I said.

One of the Faugron merchants, standing at the head of the contingent, was arguing vociferously with the Undertakers. To my surprise, it was a woman. But it was even more shocking than that.

“Myusel...-san...? I heard Clara whisper, sounding as amazed as I felt. And little wonder: the woman looked very much like someone we knew. Her hair and her clothes were a bit different, perhaps, but her features were so similar it was hard to imagine it could be anyone else. They didn’t just share the elves’ distinctive pointed ears. It was much more like the resemblance between myself and my older sister Jijilea or my younger sister Elvia: there was something deeper, something that hinted at blood relation.

But there was no way that young woman, Myusel Fourant, could be here, now. She was a maid working at the mansion of Kanou Shinichi, an outworlder guest of the Eldant Empire. She wouldn’t be leading any merchant convoy into our territory. Besides, Myusel Fourant was a retiring girl who seemed slightly afraid of everything. This elf woman was the exact opposite—she was arguing aggressively

in the face of an entire contingent of elite soldiers.

It had to be someone else. Simple mistaken identity. And yet...

“Elder Sister...”

“I know. We can’t merely ignore this.”

We had come here in part to help address several tasks related to the relocation of the capital—but we had a bit of leeway before the time we were supposed to meet our commander. I nodded to Clara, and began to approach the argument.

“As I told you: *you* were the ones who placed this order,” the elf said, displaying a piece of paper. “I have the order form right here. Your official seal is stamped right—”

“And as *I* told *you*, the situation has changed,” one of the Undertakers interrupted angrily. “We can’t accept this shipment anymore. Unless we can get in touch with the person who placed the order—”

“I believe that’s *your* problem. As for us, we delivered what was requested, as promised and on schedule.”

“Listen, maybe tomorrow you can—”

“Come back? I’m not some child who’s been sent down the street for a cup of sugar. Do you have any idea how much it would cost to stay here another night? Will you pay for the extra expenses?”

“Er, well...”



“Hmm,” I grunted. Call me crass, but I found this somewhat amusing. Here were the Undertakers, the capital’s elite soldiers, overawed by an elf woman who looked like a maid I knew. The guard’s response lacked conviction; he clearly knew the elf was in the right. His hesitation was obvious. From what I gathered, the Bahairamanian army, or rather the Undertakers specifically, had placed some sort of order with Faugron & Associates, but was now refusing to receive delivery.

There had been an extensive purge of corrupt members of the military not that long before, and considerable shuffling of personnel. Even the largely independent Undertakers hadn’t been exempt. The process had left some orders of business up in the air with no one to follow up on them. Perhaps this was one of them.

“Might I intrude for a moment?” I asked. When the soldier saw my uniform—and specifically, my rank—he straightened up and saluted. The Undertakers might be outside the ordinary chain of command, but we still belonged to the same army, and rank had to be respected.

If anything, in fact, the man looked downright relieved. He’d clearly had his hands a bit too full with this Faugron girl, and was more than happy to pass responsibility—meaning to pass the headache—to a superior officer.

The elf woman took a breath, then turned to me. “Are you in charge here?” Now that I had a better look at her, I was even more convinced of how similar she appeared to Myusel Fourant. But a powerful light shone in her eyes, and she radiated a force of personality, as Myusel Fourant certainly did not.

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I don’t have responsibility here. I’m just passing by. However, there is a question I wish to ask you.”

“And what might that be?”

“Do you know a girl named Myusel Fourant?”

The woman didn’t answer immediately, but her eyes went wide. So she did know the name. Some relative, I had no doubt.

“I was merely thinking, you look exactly like her.”

“Are you saying you know Myusel—that you know my daughter?”

“*Daughter?*” I heard Clara whisper. She sounded shocked, but as for me, suddenly it all made sense. Elves don’t age especially quickly—you might say the prime of their lives lasts a very long time. This woman might look exactly like Myusel yet be many, many years older than her. To my eyes, they might have been identical twins, but who knew?

“I once spent several days at the mansion where she works.”

“You? A Bahairamanian soldier?” the woman said, frowning her

eyebrows. So she did know Myusel. I'd said nothing of her being a resident of the Eldant Empire.

"I confess, the circumstances were somewhat complicated."

And if I were to spell them out, I would end up having to explain how it had all begun with us kidnapping Kanou Shinichi. And speaking of my missions to an outsider like this was certainly not advised. To say nothing of the "side job" I was now indulging in without the knowledge of my superiors: namely, helping to smuggle products of otaku culture, provided by Shinichi, into Bahairam.

"But let it be said that Myusel Faurant was quite hospitable to me on that occasion," was all I said. To me—and to Clara, if we were going to be specific. During our covert stay at Kanou Shinichi's household, we had pretended Clara was a distant relation of Myusel's, and had thus evaded the scrutiny of the Eldant Empire. As for me, I had dyed my hair and passed myself off as my little sister Elvia.

"In any event," I said, casting a glance at the Undertaker soldiers. "I gather our military placed some sort of order with Faugron & Associates. But now we're refusing delivery? Would someone care to explain to me? Am I correct that you're unable to get in touch with the person who placed the order? Have you contacted a superior officer?"

"Ahem, well..." The soldiers all looked deeply conflicted. I had rank on them, yet they weren't sure they should be divulging sensitive details to a member of another branch. But the man who looked like the oldest among them, evidently sensing that nothing would go anywhere at this rate, finally said, "We... can't right now."

"You can't? You are members of the Undertakers, are you not? Security forces from the Dragon's Den?"

"Yes ma'am! Second Security Squadron, Dragon's Den!" the soldier responded smartly. He spared a glance at the elven merchant, then continued, "We're forbidden from admitting outsiders to the facility without the permission of our superiors..."

"I'm starting to see the problem."

To reiterate, the Dragon's Den was one of Bahairam's most important military facilities and one of its biggest state secrets. Hence, in principle, absolutely nobody except the Undertakers were allowed inside. Let alone someone from outside the military, someone who wasn't even a citizen of Bahairam. By the same token, when someone from the Dragon's Den placed an order with the Faugron association, they would have to grant special permission for the merchants to enter the facility. Or alternatively, they would have to enlist several dozen of their own troops to serve as porters. But anything that might have been requested by the Den was, almost by definition, likely to require secrecy. They couldn't simply stand here unloading it out on

the road, where any passerby might see them. Not to mention they were impeding traffic.

Then again, that wasn't a decision for an anonymous security guard on the ground to make, and without being able to contact their superior, they had no choice but to turn the merchants away—or at least, that was how they saw it.

"What's going on?" the female elf finally asked me.

"It's not easy to explain, but—er, first, may I ask your name?"

"Falmelle. Falmelle Faugron," she said. I wondered if there was some reason her surname was different from Myusel's. But I had more pressing questions.

"Faugron? As in, Faugron & Associates?"

"I happen to be the president," Falmelle said with something of a smile. "As this was to be our first delivery in Bahairam, and with it being a large order involving the military at that, I wanted to take care of it personally... But here we are."

"Hmm..." I frowned. I didn't actually have authority over the Dragon's Den, so I couldn't just go ordering people around. But it didn't seem right to simply walk away, either. What to do?

That was when it happened.

I gasped. For an instant, I couldn't process what was occurring. Did the sound come first, or the light?

"Wha—"

A bright flash and an explosion surrounded us. The intense light and noise temporarily deprived us of the ability to see or hear. As we stood dumbfounded, we were assaulted by—shaking. The ground we were standing on, which should have been solid rock, rippled up and down.

"Grr—?!" I instinctively dropped to my knees and looked around. As my vision came swimming back to me, I could see the Third Capital bucking violently. Fissures ran up and down the streets, even extending into the walls of nearby buildings. In fact, several structures tilted, cracked, or were reduced to rubble before my eyes.

"So this—I!"

This was the notorious earthquake. It seemed so much more destructive than what the young soldier had described. Besides, I couldn't believe the shaking of the earth had caused the flash and the blast. It was rather like if someone had set fire to gunpowder, or a barrel of oil, but I couldn't imagine it happening everywhere in the capital at once. Yet that was what seemed to have happened, a succession of explosions all over the city.

This couldn't be. A simple shaking of the earth would never explain what had happened.

"Fire?!" someone shouted, as if to second my suspicions. At the

same instant, the distribution of light and shadow in my vision shifted wildly. Several powerful sources of light had emerged simultaneously. Awash in light from every direction at once, our shadows were cast starkly on the ground.

“What’s this?!” I looked around again to discover goutts of flame lancing into the sky all over town. These weren’t just typical fires; they were literally pillars of flame, bursting out of the rents in the earth. They didn’t spread to the side so much as they stretched up and up and up, giving off red—no, almost purple light. And then there was

“The heat...” I could hear Clara and our guide groan. Great, hot winds came gusting from the fires, hot enough to roast skin if you stood in them too long. Again, I didn’t believe this was any normal fire. Most fires produced more smoke than flame, at least in the short run. But here I saw hardly any smoke at all, just a blinding conflagration. And so many of those pillars—dozens, even hundreds stretching above the skyline of the Capital, scattering embers near and far.

“The Dragon’s Den—!” the security officer from the Undertakers shouted.

He and the other soldiers were looking on, astonished; I followed their collective gaze to find the biggest pillar of all had erupted square in the middle of the Third Capital. It was, indeed, in the vicinity of the Dragon’s Den. We weren’t close enough to judge exactly how large the eruptions were, but I had to think each one was at least big enough to swallow a house.

Whatever the exact details, this was truly bad. A catastrophe.

I jumped to my feet, shouting to the Undertakers, “Fall back; we have to evacuate! Get away from the Dragon’s Den! Out of the city, if possible!”

Ordering such a move was wildly beyond my authority, but somebody had to take control here or people would die. I turned to our guide and continued shouting: “Tell the citizens to evacuate as well! Get everyone out of here!”

“Ma’am!” The security personnel and our young guide both hastened to obey. For the security officers, maybe it was the inability to get in touch with their superior. Perhaps they figured they wouldn’t be held responsible for following orders, even orders from an officer in a different branch of service. Next I turned to the elves of Faugron & Associates. “You, too. You all have to—”

“Say what you will, but we haven’t completed our delivery.” To my astonishment, Falmelle Faugron was reluctant to evacuate. The rest of the merchants—many of them elves, all of them presumably deferring to her—seemed likewise unwilling to leave the cargo and

flee.

“You have to decide which is more important, your delivery or your lives,” I said in a voice which even I could tell contained a hint of frustration.

“They’re equally important!” Falmelle Faugron declared. That was the pronouncement of a dyed-in-the-wool merchant. But right here, right now, it wasn’t very admirable. Nothing, I assumed, could genuinely be as important as one’s life. And if you thought something was, you were most likely deluded. For once you were dead, whatever had been important to you would matter no more.

“I don’t know what’s happened, but we’ve got to get—”

I was interrupted by another massive tremor.

“Ahh!” Clara sounded genuinely panicked, a rarity for her. A crack split open the roadway on which we, Falmelle Faugron, and her merchants stood—broke apart the flagstone street as if it were made of paper. The fissure came at us as fast as lightning, accompanied by a hail of rubble and small stones. It would have been easy enough to jump over the crack in the earth—except that the next instant, several towers of flame spurted from the ground.

“Hrgh—!” We stumbled back, raising our arms to cover our faces against the blistering heat. The towers of flame were appearing everywhere, so that they formed something like a fence—almost a wall, in fact. We could see what was on the other side of them, although everything was distorted by heat haze.

The shaking had caused several buildings to collapse at their foundations, producing massive piles of debris. The once wide street was choked by the rubble, making it difficult to find a path around the gouts of flame. This was bad: we were completely separated. Falmelle Faugron and her merchants were on the side closer to the Dragon’s Den. That is, they had no way to get out of the city...

“Madam President!” I could hear the elves crying over the roar of the fire. Presumably they intended to follow Falmelle’s orders. Perhaps she was a brilliant merchant—I didn’t know—but in this situation we needed more than a sharp mind for sales. I didn’t expect she was equipped to deal with a situation this dangerous.

“Hm...?”

In the twisting, mirage-like image beyond the flames, I saw something almost miraculous: Falmelle Faugron, and she alone, appeared to me with no distortion. I had noticed the moment we met that she was, in fact, quite a beautiful woman, but now she appeared as more than that—she had an uncanny quality difficult to describe. As if even the heat were afraid to touch her.

Falmelle Faugron stood calmly among the drifting embers. As vivid as the rest of her seemed, though, the large eyes that stared out

of her pale face appeared to look into the far distance. She reminded me of a mage contemplating the Ultimate before they used an exceptionally powerful spell. But it wasn't quite the same, somehow. Somehow, I knew it wasn't the same.

She gradually opened the fingers of her hands, stretching both arms toward the sky. It was as if she was receiving something from above, something none of us could see.

"Is this...?"

To my surprise, Falmelle began quaking. Then the spasms stopped, and she lowered her arms and turned toward us. She was unmistakably coherent. It was not that the sudden emergency had driven her mad.

"You there! The Bahairamanian soldiers!" she exclaimed, loud enough to be heard over the roar of the flames.

"You mean us?!" I shouted back.

"You said you spent some time where my daughter works, did you not?"

"Yes, but—"

I was confused: why ask about that now? This hardly seemed the time or place. I furrowed my brow, but Falmelle Faugron continued: "Then you know Shinichi-san, don't you?"

"Yes, of course, I know him, but—"

But I still didn't understand what he had to do with this situation. Falmelle Faugron, though, simply went on, "Bring him here!"

"Say what?!"

"I have a power, the Foreseeing Eye!" Falmelle said. So she was a prophet. Every once in a great while, a person might be born with some very specific, highly personal magic, something that couldn't be taught, received, or inherited, but stood apart from the typical varieties of magical power. Some among the religionists of the world called such people prophets.

Typically, such people had a minimum of control over these powers. One with this "Foreseeing Eye," for example, didn't know every detail of the future at all times. Nor could she simply peer into what was to come on a whim. It occurred spontaneously, hence why it was prophecy and not mere prediction. It almost seemed to be given to the prophet by a god or some similar being.

Yet even so, it was said that at moments of great import for their own lives or indeed for the entire world, these people could be crucial keys to what the future held. Had Falmelle's gift discovered a way out of this crisis?

"If he comes here," she said, "things will be resolved!"

At that, I glanced at Clara. What could that mean? Yes, of course we knew the man Kanou Shinichi. Knew him very well. We both

thought highly of him, but that was as a sort of missionary of culture from another world, and not because of his personal or physical abilities, which were indeed quite ordinary. Bring him—just him—here? What could that accomplish?

On the other side of the flames, though, Falmelle's face was grim. "I'm begging you!" None of the other elves with her showed any sign of objecting or contradicting what she said. They, at least, trusted her prophetic powers, believed that what she said was true—that Kanou Shinichi could somehow solve this problem.

"Elder Sister..." Clara searched my face, disturbed.

I hesitated for a moment, but then shouted back to Falmelle, "Understood!"

At this moment, we had no way to help Falmelle Faugron and her subordinates, let alone rescue them. We couldn't even clear away the wreckage, or quench the pillars of flame. The citizens would be evacuating by now under the guidance of the military, and as people who had come here merely to make a military report—in other words, as total outsiders—it would be difficult at best for us to divert anyone to help.

In that case, we had to do what we alone could do.

"I'll have him here as quickly as I can!" I said. "Try to go to ground somewhere safe until we get back—the Dragon's Den!" That facility had to be the most impregnable thing in the Third Capital. And its central location made it exceptionally simple to find, an excellent North Star for someone seeking a safe haven. I couldn't imagine even the Undertakers would turn away civilians or outsiders under these circumstances.

"I wish you luck!" Falmelle replied. She clearly had the utmost faith in her Foreseeing Eye, for her face, there on the far side of the flames, was wreathed in a smile.

Chapter One: The Calm Before the Storm?

Pursued by his foes, Masato ran. He ran until he came to the end of the earth. Literally: the ground dropped away before his eyes, giving way to a poisonous-looking purple liquid that bubbled gently, preventing him from going any farther.

It took Masato a moment to process that this was the “sea.” Not the one he knew. Each time one of the waves crashed in, a flurry of bubbles would emerge and burst, emitting a noxious cloud. It looked like it would be profoundly dangerous to get in this water unprotected. A panoply of animal skeletons lying where the waves came in spoke to creatures whose muscle and flesh had been dissolved and carried away.

This was it, the poison sea, and Masato had no way to cross it.

“Hrgh...” Pressing a hand to his mouth, Masato turned to the girl beside him. The nameless waif was cocking her head, looking at him questioningly. As if she didn’t understand what had him so concerned, notwithstanding the oncoming enemy. Having been born and raised in this world, perhaps she couldn’t grasp the crushing terror and despair that weighed upon Masato. For her, the sea was not the life-giving mother of all things, but the great, wide waste in which all life found its end. It was only natural they should encounter such differences in understanding, having been born in completely different worlds.

A different world. That, too, weighed on Masato. Everything here was so alien to the place he had been born. He didn’t know what was rational or logical here. Just staying alive seemed to be a struggle. And in this world where he didn’t know his right hand from his left, was he going to go toe to toe with opponents who had been born and raised in this place and knew it intimately? It was the height of foolishness.

But Masato had resolved to protect this nameless young woman. She was the only one he had felt any connection to since the moment the super-dimensional oscillation weapon had gone awry, catapulting him here to this world. She was human. This world was ruled by bizarre, amorphous beings, who kept those who looked like Masato as if they were cattle, forcing them to live in cages, naked, trapped among their own filth, their only destiny to be eaten by the shapeless creatures.

And none of the humans here even questioned this.

For Masato, this world was a place of despair. But the girl who reached out her hand to him... she was his hope, even his salvation. Though she understood nothing, her heart made her capable of sympathizing with others, and in that sense, she was completely human.

"This way!" Masato tugged on the girl's hand and started running again. He had been heading straight for the sea, but now he turned to follow the coast. The edge of the land was ragged, reflecting the incursions made by the ocean; he could spot several openings that appeared to be limestone caves. He might not be able to cross the poison sea and escape his pursuers, but he started to think he might at least be able to hide from them.

That was when a brutal voice reached Masato's ears: "There he is!" He looked back and saw several of his pursuers. They looked like squid monsters, walking along on their extended tentacles. And they were coming his way. The one in front had two of its tentacles outstretched. It was making some complicated movement with them, and they were glowing. The light traced strange patterns in the air. Masato understood the creature was fashioning a sigil. Magic. These invertebrate lifeforms could use magic. It was about the most unscientific thing he could imagine—but magical powers were a standard technology throughout this world. In fact, magic was the basis for their entire society, and naturally it had been appropriated to serve as a weapon.

"Crap!" Masato raised the portable railgun he was carrying and fired it at the squid-thing. He'd burned through his actual ammunition ages ago, but he'd been collecting rocks and pebbles as he fled, and they made good enough substitutes. A stone, accelerated to the speed of sound, rocketed toward the leading squid creature with a sonic boom. It hit the thing square on, causing its gooey body to explode.

Which was great, except that...

"*Crap!*" Masato saw the word EMPTY flashing in red letters on the railgun's small indicator screen. Besides that word was the number 8.

Railguns could fire anything you could fit into the barrel, but of course, they needed electricity to function—and this world had no charging stations. Once the weapon's internal battery was depleted, it would go from deadly firearm to harmless toy.

Masato could use it eight more times. After that, he might as well just throw the gun at them.

"This way, hurry!" Masato said, pulling the girl behind him as they ran along the coast. And then, as they rounded a spit of land jutting well out into the sea...

"What...?!" Masato stopped short. He saw something that couldn't

be. “.....Oh my God.....” He sounded stupefied, despite the situation they were in.

The red sky. The poison sea. The invertebrate rulers of this land. Their cities. Their magic. Everything Masato had encountered in this world seemed upside-down to him—and yet there, smack in the middle of it all, for no reason he could discern, stood something he recognized.

“That... It can’t be... But it is...!” Masato exclaimed. He could feel his heart race. Astonishment, and terror, quickened his breath. The nameless girl just looked at him, puzzled. She had no idea what had amazed Masato so much.

“It’s—!”

A *miracle*, was all he could think. The thing before him was filthy with the passage of years, maybe centuries, but it remained intact. Just the way it had looked when he’d seen it on a school trip as a boy. He seemed to recall the pamphlet saying it was some fifteen meters tall.

“The Vairocana Buddha of Todaiji Temple...”

Popularly known as the Great Buddha of Nara. The massive statue housed in Nara’s Todaiji Temple, the largest wooden building in the world. It sat there, half buried in the sand, as if blissfully oblivious to how out of place it looked.

Could this be some bizarre coincidence? Some construct that just happened to look like the Great Buddha? But the humans on this planet were less than primitive, with nothing like the tools or technology to construct a statue this size. They didn’t practice Buddhism, or, it seemed, any religion at all.

Could the squids have built it, then? But would the invertebrate rulers of this planet deliberately build a gigantic statue of a human, let alone a human who happened to look exactly like the Vairocana Buddha? The chances seemed just about nil. But that had to mean...

“The super-dimensional oscillation weapon...!”

The ultimate weapon of mass destruction, capable of bending time and space. Even the people who created it hadn’t understood what would happen when it was used unchecked.

“I.....!”

He had been so sure he’d been transported to some other world. Some other planet, some parallel universe—somewhere not the planet he had grown up on.

If he had come here, though, might that mean he could go back? Might someone who had analyzed the super-dimensional oscillation weapon come to rescue him? Or maybe the fold or whatever it was in space-time would straighten itself out and he would be returned to his own world. He had entertained these fantasies all along; it was the

only way he could endure. Masato had survived this long with the sole objective of taking this young woman back to his own planet.

But now... Now he realized he'd had everything wrong the whole time.

"I'm back. I'm home." Masato fell to his knees on the blackened, burned sand. "All the time, it was..."

Had it been thousands of years? Tens of thousands?

What if he had only jumped through time? What if the world he wanted to go back to was already...

"Aggghh! You maniacs! Damn you all to hell!" Masato cried, while the nameless girl continued to look on in puzzlement. In the distance, the squids—this era's equivalent of humanity, it seemed—were forming a net around him, but Masato no longer even had the strength to stand.

.....

.....

"And there you have it," I said as the end credits rolled, the theme song ("Squid army, squid army, no match for us!") sounding in the students' ears. "This is one of the major tropes for endings of sci-fi stuff. Obviously not a happy ending, but it sort of loops you back around. You're like, 'I thought this was some alternate world, but it turns out it was the end of the one I know and live in.' And that's where the closure comes from in this sort of structure. It's a very forceful note to end on. You can do variations on the idea, stuff like, 'The creature I thought was a horrible monster turned out to be human all along.' That sort of thing."

I grabbed the disc out of the DVD player, sort of organizing my thoughts out loud as I put it back in its case. "Settings where civilization has been destroyed are very popular. *Nau**caa* comes right to mind, and from a broader perspective, stuff like *Fist ** the North Star* or *Attack ** Titan*. *Lap*ta's* another one. Sometimes the twist doesn't come right at the end, but the world is still one where civilization is in serious decline. Stuff like *Trig*n*. In fiction, the classic expression of this trope is probably the *Foundatio** trilogy..."

All the students in the classroom were looking at me blankly. They were probably a little shocked: this was the first time I'd shown them something with such a resolutely bad ending.

"What did you think? Interesting?" I asked, a little anxiously.

But one of the students exclaimed "Yes!" and nodded emphatically. It was Romilda Guld. The diminutive girl in the front row had sat with her eyes glued to the screen all throughout *Tokusatsu Drama: Army of the Squids*. I'd thought she might be put off, because the design of the enemy squid-men is kind of grotesque, but it didn't seem to bother her at all.

“I admit the ending surprised me, though!” I could see her pointy ears, visible amidst her red hair, twitch. Several of the students around her, likewise with pointed ears, nodded in agreement.

Those ears, by the way, weren’t special effects or part of a costume. They were real. These girls were dwarves—just like you’ve heard of in fairy tales. But take a good look around the classroom, and you’d discover dwarves weren’t the only ones there. Another group had pointed ears, too, but they were much taller and a lot paler than the dwarves—they were elves. There were also a few lycanthropes, people with animal ears or tails. Long story short, about half the class was human, but the other half was made up of people who looked almost human, but not quite. You probably know the word for them: demi-humans. It sounds like something out of some fantasy story, but here I was teaching them.

My name is Kanou Shinichi. And I’m the General Manager of the parallel-world-first entertainment company, Amutech.

It turned out that in Japan, in the Sea of Trees at the foot of Mount Fuji, there was a “hyperspace wormhole” that led to an alternate world, and the Japanese government had lost no time establishing relations with the inhabitants of this place. The locals had had the best response to manga, games, and anime: in short, otaku culture. The government quickly called in (or rather, dragged in) someone with the requisite expertise to head up Amutech. That someone was me.

Okay, so what the Japanese government had really had in mind was cultural invasion. When I found out about it, I’d rebelled, and stuff had gotten pretty tense for a while, but these days I really was here as an evangelist of otaku culture, just the way we’d originally said I would be. And I was having a pretty good time.

“Hey, Sensei, you said you can’t use magic in Japan, right?” The question came from one of my elf students, Loek Slayson. Tall and pale, handsome, with golden hair and blue eyes, he was pretty much the stereotypical image of an elf. He was also sort of the leader of the elf contingent in the classroom, and he and Romilda used to get in all sorts of arguments. (Turns out it’s true about elves and dwarves not getting along.) But now, although they still liked to snipe at each other, I often saw them walking together, and at least in my classroom, relations between elves and dwarves had gotten a little more cordial.

“Huh? What’s that got to do with anything?” I asked.

“In the movie, Masato seemed like he was surprised by magic, too.”

“Ah... I see. Yeah. I’m not sure we *can’t* use it... Maybe it would be more accurate to say there isn’t a lot of magical energy around,” I

said, thinking back to the time I'd taken a little trip home to Japan. Around here, magic served as the fundamental technology, but it goes without saying that that isn't true of modern Japan. Or at least, it isn't recognized as such by most people. The fundamental energy needed to use magic spells—whether you called them sprites or magical energy or whatever—just didn't exist in Japan these days.

"You *can* do it," I said, "if you bring along a bottle of sprites, or a magic stone or something, and draw on the energy in that. But generally speaking, no, we can't use magic in my world."

"But isn't that true of the movie world, too?" Loek said, looking confused. "Masato couldn't use magic in his world. And the world of the squid people was supposed to be Masato's world's future, right? So how come they could use magic?"

"Good question," I said, thinking back over the movie. "What the squid people have is called ESP. It only looks like magic. But strictly speaking, the squids have developed technology that allows them to control and channel telekinetic powers. They've used science to master it—or anyway, that's how the story goes. It just looks like magic to Masato."

"ESP?"

"That and psuedo-science." I put the DVD back in the package. The back of the box described the movie not as fantasy, but as science fiction. In other words, some of what happened might look like magic, but there was, at least in principle, a logical, scientific explanation for everything. Then again, more and more zombie films were being classified as SF these days, so maybe we had gotten to the point where it was less science fiction and more "slightly flummoxing."

"It's Clarke's third law," I said, thinking back to some anime I'd seen somewhere. "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

"So he can't tell what is and isn't magic?"

"Think of it this way—you guys don't know how this DVD or this television work, right? You probably thought they were magic at first."

"Oh yeah, we did!" Several students around the room nodded.

To be fair, given the differences in technology and culture, Loek and the others would probably think most things from Japan were magic. TVs and computers obviously, but also automobiles, electrical appliances—the list went on. In a lot of ways, assuming magic was what made things work was the simplest and easiest explanation. When I really thought about it, though, even I couldn't adequately explain the exact inner workings of a computer, for example. I guess there wasn't that much difference between mumbling, "Uh, it's electrons and stuff," and outright saying, "It's magic."

“Hey, but if technology looks like magic to us,” Loek said, “then, Sensei, does the magic in our world sometimes look like extremely advanced scientific technology to you?”

“Oh, uh, well, in this case, ‘magic’ is just shorthand for anything you don’t understand...” Not the specific technology they used here in this world.

Before I could finish explaining, though, something flitted through my mind. A memory of the so-called “forbidden armor.” It evidently came from this world, but no matter how you sliced it, it looked like a powered exoskeleton from some sci-fi story.

Could it be another civilization existed here in the past, one with technology comparable to Earth’s? And that it was later destroyed...?

Magic and science tended to be seen as opposing concepts, but maybe they didn’t have to be. “Magic” was really just what we called any technique or technology that couldn’t be explained by what an onlooker knew about the world. Even alchemy, widely considered to be a kind of magic, was, strictly speaking, a scientific endeavor. Women accused of being witches were often simply folk healers—almost a kind of doctor—and scientists in their own right. There probably wasn’t any magic as such involved.

In short, there was a distinct possibility that what we called magic was just a way of referring to things we hadn’t understood scientifically yet, and that fundamentally there was no real difference between them. It was even possible that the apparent “magic” in this world, like that in the movie, could be explained scientifically. (Even if trading the word “magic” for “ESP” didn’t really explain anything at all.)

But anyway...

A vanished world...

I wondered what sort of place it could have been. I entertained the question idly as I pulled the next DVD out of its case.



I was in a bird-drawn carriage on the way home from school, sitting across from a woman in a military uniform.

“Hey, Minori-san,” I said.

“Yeah? What’s up?” she said, blinking as she turned toward me from the window she’d been looking out of. She was older than me, but still looked babyish somehow, and—maybe because of the glasses and her big, gentle eyes—sort of cute. This was Koganuma Minori-san, a member of the JSDF and my bodyguard (or, more accurately, bodyguard to me and one other person). If anything really bad happened, a squadron from the local JSDF garrison would come

running, but I couldn't have a detachment of armed soldiers around me twenty-four seven. For one thing, that would be suffocating, and for another, it could aggravate or even potentially provoke the local populace. So instead, it was just Minori-san, one young woman whose job was to keep an eye on me.

Maybe you're thinking one young woman doesn't seem like a lot of protection, but she was a skilled martial artist and a crack shot, so despite her sweet looks, it was pretty reassuring to have her around.

All that aside...

"You remember the forbidden armor?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Whatever happened to that?"

"What do you mean? They put it somewhere safe in the castle. I'm sure it's still there." She sounded a touch exasperated.

"Yeah... I'm sure you're right."

I remembered that much. Powered exoskeletons are great and all, but there was a reason they called it the forbidden armor; it wasn't the best thing to have lying around. So it was in a storeroom somewhere in Holy Eldant Castle, with a sign on it strictly ordering that nobody touch it.

"Why—what about it? Something about the forbidden armor on your mind, Shinichi-kun?"

"On my mind? Not really... I mean, it's just, those were definitely powered suits, right? Like, classic sci-fi gadgets."

It's not like science fiction has a monopoly on powered exoskeletons. Lots of novels and manga and anime and games have exoskeletons that move using magic. And if you supplied it with some form of energy, any suit of armor could become a powered exoskeleton (in the sense that you wore it over yourself). Some of these suits were even home to living creatures that acted as muscles, or they were possessed by ghosts, or whatever else. Think of manga like *G**ver*, *Bura*o*, or *Apocalypse Z****.

But the forbidden armor had definitely seemed like a product of scientific technology. They shot laser beams, had gas turbines that made a *vm-vm-vm* sound while they worked, and above all, they just sort of looked like it.

"Yeah, that's true," Minori-san said, not sounding totally convinced. Maybe she'd had the same thought. But these things were and belonged in the possession of the Holy Eldant Empire. We already knew how dangerous they could be, too, so begging to have another look at them didn't seem like the best plan. We did have someone on our side, a man named Matoba-san, to handle political negotiations like that, but come to think of it, I hadn't seen him around for a while.

"I've had this thought," I said, looking out the window. Green

scenery, totally idyllic, rolled by. It looked less like some other world and more just a country backroad. “I wondered if, in this world—if civilization existed here once, fell, and was rebuilt.”

Minori-san crossed her arms, thought about it, and finally sighed. “We can’t rule out the possibility,” she said, but her tone suggested she felt it was neither of our jobs to pursue it, either. It might be an interesting idea, sure, but trying to find out more on our own could cause more problems than it solved, not to mention it didn’t seem likely to be something we could accomplish all alone, anyway. It seemed more likely we would have to wait until trade between Japan and the Eldant Empire, or maybe some other countries here, was really booming, after which archaeologists might show up and start investigating.

“Well, just hypothetically,” I said, thinking back to *Tokusatsu Drama: Army of the Squids*. The premise of the movie, in a few words, was that the oceans had been so badly polluted that the squid people evolved and came up on land, after which they annihilated human civilization. It was possible some similar episode of destruction had occurred here in this world. My thinking was, the normal passage of time allowed culture to continue. Not to be destroyed, or even reduced to the level of the Middle Ages. There would have to be some unbridgeable gulf, some catastrophe that had prevented the transmission of cultural or scientific knowledge. Otherwise, why would this world be where it was?

Of course, gradual cultural decline, or a “return to nature,” was always a possibility. But in that case, you would think historical records would at least mention a previous, more scientifically advanced society. As far as I knew, though, nothing did.

“Which raises the question, how was this earlier society destroyed?” I said.

“Hmm?” Minori-san said, frowning at the word *destroyed*. It was an unsettling one, for sure. But she wasn’t a historian or an archaeologist, or even someone from this world. She was just an army officer, and she didn’t have the answer. “A natural disaster, maybe?” she ventured, but she still didn’t look very convinced.



Two men sat facing each other in a room that was dark even though it was high noon. One of them was middle-aged—or perhaps, one might say, in the prime of his life—with his hair parted in the middle. He wore an ash-colored suit, and gave a strong impression of being spent, a lifelong corporate slave with no hope of advancement. If you took that impression at face value, though, it was your own

fault. An old proverb holds that “The able hawk hides its claws,” and it’s always the people with the secret plots who look the most harmless and innocent. The better to get others to let their guard down.

“So, what are you telling me?”

Matoba Jinzaburou, that was his name. He was Chief of the Far East Culture Exchange Promotion Bureau, reporting directly to the Cabinet.

At least, that was what it said on his business card. In truth, he was the leader, the real ringleader, of the Japanese government’s plan to invade another world using otaku culture. He was hardly an aficionado of otaku culture himself, so he was rarely the one doing the dirty work of cultural invasion. Rather, he handled political negotiations with the Holy Eldant Empire, the country on the other side of the hyperspace tunnel. He was a sort of interdimensional diplomat.

The cultural invasion plan had been officially dropped after Kanou Shinichi’s “mutiny,” but all Matoba had done was revise his methods. He would use peaceful means to achieve advantageous negotiations with this other world, but discovering and reporting what profit could be pried out of this alternate dimension remained one of his main tasks.

“Truthfully, these materials are difficult for us to accurately evaluate.”

Sitting across from Matoba, leaning back into a sofa, was a man who looked substantially like him. About the same age, similar suit—but this man looked more energetic, like someone who got things done. The very opposite of Matoba. Politicians needed that; they needed to look like movers and shakers. Whatever they might be thinking inside, outwardly they had to appear eager and capable.

The politician pointed a finger, indicating a collection of papers spread out on the table between them. Four reports, each held together with a paperclip. The topmost page of each featured a photograph accompanied by a name:

Myusel Fourant.

Elvia Harneiman.

Brooke Darwin.

Cerise Darwin.

These last two didn’t look human to the politician; the pictures seemed to show large, bipedal lizards. In fact, a close look at the picture of Myusel Fourant revealed pointy ears, and Elvia Harneiman had ears like a dog’s, although they were easy to miss in her mess of dark hair.

None of these people, in the mind of a twenty-first-century

Japanese politician, counted as human. They looked vaguely human, but weren't: they were demi-humans. They practically screamed "alternate world." All were residents of the Holy Eldant Empire, and the reports before him included blood and cellular analysis, done discreetly by the Japanese government.

"The MEXT faction is making a racket, to say nothing of the university professors."

"I might have expected as much," Matoba responded with a sigh.

The results were impossible, they all thought; inconceivable. And it was the same with all four samples. The problem wasn't just people in the medical or biological sciences, or even chemists and the like; physicists were getting in on the act, too, proposing outlandish hypotheses.

"The older they get, the more stubborn they are," Matoba said.

"I don't believe any of the old farts ever really understood the hyperspace tunnel or the whole existence of this other world. They think there's some other country under the ground."

The "older" ones, the "old farts," were the elderly politicians, both current and retired (but still active behind the scenes), along with those who were not politicians but major movers in finance. For better or for worse, these were people who had succeeded in life, and it led them to place great faith in their own assumptions and experience. They didn't like to acknowledge new things, and their impulse toward surprising or uncomfortable facts was often to wipe them out before they were fully understood.

"When was the sci-fi boom—the 1970s?" the politician mused.

"Yes, I'm sure most of our elderly friends lived right through it. Although I believe it was mostly easily digested space slash-em-ups and UFO pictures. Space-time probably doesn't mean much to them."

"Fair enough..."

Then Matoba had a thought: when had *Planet ** the Apes* first been shown in Japan? Hadn't that been right around the time of the SF boom? He seemed to remember it being followed by a film called *Tokusatsu Drama: Army of the Squids*.

"In any event," said the politician on the sofa, crossing his arms, "we now need to reconsider our engagement with the Eldant Empire—in fact, with that entire world."



"Let's eat!" I said, clapping my hands together before the profusion of food in a gesture of thanks. I was grateful to all the ingredients that had given themselves up to make this delicious meal. And I was grateful to the chef who had taken the time and effort to

turn those ingredients into everything that sat before us. The gesture used to be purely ritualistic for me, but coming to this new world had given me a lot to think about, including how much I appreciated what I was eating.

“Let’s eat,” everyone else chorused. Every day, morning and evening, the inhabitants of this mansion—which doubled as Amutech’s company dormitory—got together to share a meal. It didn’t matter if you were master or servant, human or demi-human; everyone was welcome at this table.

Naturally, different races meant different preferences—and sometimes entirely different eating habits—so the dishes were tailored specially to each diner. Some were more cooked or more spiced than others, for example. But in any event, it was a nice, normal meal.

Or maybe not quite normal. In fact, for about two weeks now, the number of people at our table had practically doubled.

“Careful, you’ll spill.”

“Eat this one, too.”

These admonitions came from a demi-human couple who looked a lot like walking lizards—the lizardmen, Brooke Darwin and his wife Cerise. They used to sit right next to each other at the table, but these days they were quite a ways apart. And the reason?

“*Manma, manma!*”

“*Nmanma!*”

Squealing children, chowing down on fruits and vegetables. The kids looked like tiny lizardmen themselves. They were Brooke and Cerise’s new babies: Man’ya, Sharya, Delark, Freem, and Gabel. If you’re wondering, they were, respectively, a girl, a girl, a boy, a boy, and a boy. Man’ya happened to have been born—or rather, hatched—a little earlier than the others, so she was a bit bigger than the rest, but by and large they just looked like round, chubby versions of their parents. SD Brookes and Cerises, if you will. It was cute.

As for Brooke and Cerise themselves, they’d taken to parenthood like ducks to water, proving that they might not look human, but we definitely had some things in common. It gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. Not to mention...

“*Shinichi...* Mn.” Man’ya, the oldest sister, looked my way and held up a fruit that resembled a strawberry.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Eat.”

“What, for me?”

“...Mn.” She nodded.

“Aw, don’t worry, Man’ya, I’ve got my own food here...” I protested gently.

One thing lizardmen and humans definitely did not share was

their preferred flavors. The stuff on their plates was mostly fruits and vegetables, practically untouched from nature, and to be honest I wasn't thrilled to be offered some of their food. Especially partially eaten. But—

"Mnn!" Man'ya shook the fruit in my direction as if to say, *Eat it!* I wasn't always sure what lizardmen were thinking, even small lizardmen, but I guess it was a lot like when a human infant gets frustrated.

"Stop that. The master has his own food to eat," Cerise admonished, but Man'ya only growled "*Gyuu*," clearly unhappy.

"My 'pologies, Master," Brooke said.

"You don't have to apologize," I said. "I'm sort of curious why she seems so intent on giving me her food, though."

Human children had a tendency to "give" their least favorite foods (think carrots and celery and stuff) to whoever was closest to them. But it didn't seem like the fruit Man'ya was offering me was especially bitter or anything.

"I wonder if maybe she's planning to fatten me up or something..."

Or maybe I was just being paranoid. Could you blame me, though? Man'ya had taken me for food the moment she was born and had spent the early days of her life biting me.

"Man'ya is completely taken with you, Master," Cerise-san said.

"Huh? She is?"

"Very much so. And sharing food is a basic courtship behavior."

"Er... Oh..."

I guess I had read somewhere that courtship among birds sometimes involved that sort of thing, and reptiles were allegedly closer to birds than they were to mammals. Maybe it made sense, in a sort of twisted way.

"Look who's Mr. Popular," said the person sitting across from me. The words carried a note of exasperation. This person wore a Gothic-Loli dress pretty much every day, the very picture of a "cool" girl—except that he was actually a guy. A remarkably pretty one. I wondered sometimes what he did to keep his mustache and stuff under control.

His name was Ayasaki Hikaru. A member of the Amutech staff and otaku evangelist just like me. Okay, so he had originally been intended to succeed (or, really, usurp) me, but long story short, he was my assistant now. When he first got here, we'd had serious differences of opinion about how to introduce otaku culture to this world, but by this point we were mostly on the same page. I thought, anyway.

"Don't you think it's about time you got serious?" Hikaru-san said,

side-eyeing me. “Settled down with someone nice?”

“Settle down? I’m still a minor!”

I looked to Minori-san for help, but she seemed amused by the whole thing. “Eh, you could always get engaged for a start. Men can marry at eighteen, right?”

Then Hikaru-san shrugged and shook his head. “This is the Eldant Empire. Who cares about Japanese laws? You could get married today if you felt like it. I think.”

“Hey, look, I’m not—Nobody is—”

But I was pretty much lost for words.

“Master.” Now Brooke was in on it. “I know m’ daughter has a great many shortcomings, but I hope I can trust you to take good care of Man’ya!” He sounded dead serious. Honestly, it kind of scared me.

“That’s not what’s happening! You’re getting ahead of yourself!”

I wasn’t about to get engaged to a one-year-old child, and a lizardman at that. What kind of monster did they take me for? Brooke had become a doting daddy the moment Man’ya was born, but it seemed to have done some strange things to him. Sure, Man’ya was adorable, and I knew sometimes people got married who were old enough to be parent and child. But one thing I could be confident of was that I wasn’t romantically or sexually interested in any lizardman, and never would be. We were completely different kinds of creatures. Then again, I’d heard that in America there were people who were way moe for dragons...

“s right!” said, for some reason, an energetic girl with animal ears and tail—Elvia Harneiman. She was another demi-human—a beast person at that: a werewolf. So at least she was a mammal. Other than the ears and tail, she pretty much looked like me. So she was, uh, “in bounds,” if you will, with her perpetually exposed midriff, and the energetic bouncing of her sweet, soft, *large*—ahem! Never mind. “Lizardmen’re off-limits!”

“Says the *wolf*,” Brooke growled.

“Werewolves are *on*-limits!”

“We’re both demi-humans.”

“But I’m squeezable!” she said, pinching her own cheek.

Brooke continued to glare at her for a moment, but then, with a slow, uncharacteristically snakelike gesture, he turned to look at me. *Eep!*

“Master...” he said.

“Er, uh, yes?” I said, unconsciously straightening up.

“Master, do you really prefer soft, squishy skin to smooth, cool scales?”

“Well, scales are definitely—no! Why are you even arguing about this, Brooke? I would have thought you’d be thrilled!”

“N-Now that you mention it...!”

“Keep it together, I’m begging you!”

Ever since Man’ya and her siblings had been born, my image of the stern, imperturbable Brooke had been somehow shattered. I guess that’s what becoming a parent does to you. It was great that he had gotten a little warmer, but in full-on crazy-dad mode, he could be kind of frightening.

“He’s right, dear. Man’ya won’t be ready to lay eggs for a while yet,” Cerise said.

Okay, I think she’s missing my point.

“Man’ya, do you like Master?” Cerise cooed, to which Man’ya nodded and replied, “...Mn.”

“What do you like most about him?”

“.....Gi?”

I guess it was a hard question for a little kid, because Man’ya just cocked her head and looked confused. I mean, it was awfully cute, but forget about that.

“Hm...?” I suddenly realized there was someone at the table who hadn’t been saying anything, but had been watching this motherly interaction between Cerise and Man’ya with a quiet smile. “What’s up, Myusel?”

“Yes? Oh, nothing,” she said, slightly flustered. Myusel Fourant: our maid.

As you could tell from her pointy ears, she had elven blood. But her father was a human, so she was actually a half-elf. Her pale skin and delicate figure were the very image of elf-ness, but at the same time, compared to the somber forest spirits we often associate with that word, she felt more human, friendlier. Maybe it was the maid thing. To be fair, I guess the elvish students at school, like Loek and Luna, didn’t come across as aloof, either.

“D-Did you need anything?”

“Aw, no, I was just thinking you seem pretty intent on Cerise and Man’ya.” She looked like she thought it was really... sweet.

“Oh... Oh, that,” Myusel said, blushing. She brought her right hand, closed in a fist, to her mouth, and looked away, just a little. I’d seen her do that so many times, but it never stopped being sweet and adorable. It was like, if you looked in the dictionary under “shy, pretty girl,” you’d find her picture. If moe could kill, Myusel would have been a tactical weapon.

Okay, not the point.

“I was just thinking... so this is how mothers and daughters are with each other...”

“Oh...”

That was when I remembered: Myusel’s mother had left her

almost before she could remember. With her being a half-elf, you knew things were complicated with her family, and Myusel had had hardly any contact with her parents. She barely knew what a mother's love was.

"I—I'm sorry," I said.

"Wha? Shinichi-sama, why are you apologizing?"

"Er, it just felt right. I should have kept my question to myself." I bowed my head.

Myusel was sensitive about her background and bloodline. You could almost call it an inferiority complex. She had made a lot of progress with it since I'd first met her, but even now she was quick to use expressions like "someone like me."

"Shinichi-sama, you mustn't. Don't apologize to someone like me..."

There, see?

Raising her hands defensively in front of her, Myusel went on, "I'm telling you, it's all right. I just sort of remembered Falmelle-san—I mean, my mother..."

"Sure, I get it."

Falmelle Faugron was Myusel's mother. She'd actually come to our mansion once before to urge Myusel to come live with her. But Myusel had actually turned her down, and Falmelle-san had gone home alone.

"You wish you could see her again?"

"Yes," Myusel said, smiling shyly. "She is my mother... We're joined by blood..."

"That's only natural," I said, sort of relieved Myusel felt so free to say that. When Falmelle-san had been here last, things had been a little awkward between her and Myusel. Then again, I guess when you haven't seen your mother for more than ten years, you're convinced she's abandoned you, and then one day she just shows up at your door, it would be hard to just be like, "Oh, hey, mom!"

Ultimately, though, I thought it was that very awkwardness that helped Myusel express her true feelings to Falmelle-san. Maybe she couldn't just curl up to her mommy like a little kid anymore, but she was able to accept Falmelle-san as her mother. Once in a while now, she thought of her and even wanted to see her.

"Blood counts for a lot," I agreed, picturing Falmelle-san's face myself. Elves staying young for as long as they did, she looked almost identical to her daughter. So much so that it made me wonder what happened to Myusel's father's genes. If they were to put on identical outfits and cover their faces, only their closest friends would probably be able to guess which of them was which.

"Falmelle-san was a dead ringer for Myusel, wasn't she?" I said.

“No kidding,” Minori-san said with a wry grin.

“Do they really look that alike?” Hikaru-san asked, and then I remembered that Falmelle-san’s visit had been before he’d come here. I knew I had taken a photograph of Myusel and Falmelle-san together, but come to think of it, I’d never shown it to him.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “In fact, at first, I thought she was Myusel’s older sister, not her mother.”

“True that,” Minori-san agreed.

“Women seem to run in the Faugron family,” Myusel said. “Or anyway, they have a lot of daughters. And it seems the mothers and daughters often resemble each other...”

That would explain how Falmelle-san had been able to recognize her daughter immediately despite not seeing her for more than ten years. The fact that they looked so much like each other proved that they were both Faugrons.

“Eh, there’s actually a theory that mothers and their daughters are directly connected,” Hikaru-san said suddenly. “Maybe the Faugron girls are so connected you can even see it in their appearances.”

“Directly connected how?”

“Ever heard of Mitochondrial Eve?”

“Huh, now that you mention it, that does ring a bell.”

Mitochondria, I recalled, were organelles inside our cells. They were closely connected to biological life, and supposedly they each had their own unique DNA or something. That caused some people to claim they were actually a sort of parasite. That idea had been the premise of more than one SF novel, movie, and game.

“Mitochondrial DNA is passed to the child from the mother, never from the father,” Hikaru-san said. “So by studying it, you can trace the matrilineal line: daughter, mother, grandmother, and so on.”

“Ah, so that’s why they say ‘Eve,’” I said.

Theoretically, tracing mitochondrial DNA this way might even make it possible to find humanity’s first genetic ancestor; in other words, the “mother” of everyone who ever lived. I’d heard that person was believed to have existed somewhere in Africa many, many eons ago.

“I wonder if Myusel and the other people here have mitochondria, too.”

“Who knows? I bet they do, though.”

“*Mai-toh...* What?” Myusel asked, looking at us blankly, clearly not quite following the conversation. Elvia, Brooke, and Cerise—in other words, the entire Eldant contingent at our table—looked equally puzzled. The interpreter rings we were wearing used magic to perform simultaneous interpreting, which was really convenient—but when there was no word in the listener’s language for a given concept, it

simply came across as-is, without any translation at all. I guess the word “mitochondria” sounded about as obvious as “space carrier” or something, so it was no surprise if people here didn’t understand it.

“This is why I think you should just relax and pick someone, Shinichi-san,” Hikaru-san said, as if it were the most logical thing in the world.

“Why does *this* make you think *that*?”

“Because you’re such a loser, Shinichi-san.”

“Urgh...”

How could he say that so calmly? I mean, yes, Myusel, Elvia, and even Petralka, the Empress of the Eldant Empire, had said in so many words that they liked me, and I still hadn’t chosen any of them (or rejected all of them), and that was pretty low, I had to admit.

“But...”

My mind tried to picture Myusel’s ancestors stretching back generations. Myusel. Falmelle-san. Her grandmother. Her great-grandmother. And then...

Humanity’s ancestors went back to ancient Africa, but if Myusel had mitochondria, and they were passed down by the mother the way they were with us... where had her ancestors come from? Could we find out how the people of this world had come to be? Even back before the civilization I believed had existed and been destroyed?

“Shinichi-sama? Is something the matter?” Myusel asked, looking worried.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said, waving my hand a bit frantically. “I was just... thinking. About, you know... stuff.”

Someone must have made that forbidden armor. Somewhere, sometime in this alternate world, there had been a scientific civilization. What had it been like? For some reason, I suddenly found I couldn’t shake the question.



We were free to do whatever after dinner. Brooke and the rest of his family went back where they lived, a little home on the mansion’s grounds, so the shouting voices and pounding footsteps of children disappeared, and the mansion was suddenly much quieter. The rest of us did whatever: took baths, finished up work, or indulged our hobbies.

In my case, of course, my work kind of *was* my hobby, so I was, if you will, doing overtime. Specifically, I was in my room preparing for tomorrow’s lessons, checking over the list of otaku stuff I’d been sent from Japan, and even making sure I had everything ready that we were going to smuggle into Bahairam as part of the “cultural invasion”

from the Eldant Empire.

In other words, I had a lot to do. Plus, the students had recently started to “level up” as otaku. They weren’t just enjoying stuff from Japan anymore; several of them had become interested in derivative works and producing original work themselves. It looked like we might actually have a doujinshi club starting up, albeit on a small scale. To be fair, I guess in a world without publishers or copyright or anything else, the line between doujinshi and official publications was pretty hazy, but we wouldn’t sweat the details for now.

I was hard at work when I heard a knock on the door. “Shinichi-sama?” Myusel said. “I’ve brought you an evening snack and some tea.”

“Thanks,” I called back. “Sorry, I can’t get up right now. Could you let yourself in?”

“Certainly. Pardon me.” And in Myusel came, bearing her tea cart. It carried the usual tea set and a simple *chazuke*, tea poured over rice. Recently, Myusel had begun bringing two snacks even when I didn’t specifically request it—she’d started joining me for my breaks. I had the same bad habit as many otaku: I could get a little too sucked into my work and not know when to stop. So having Myusel come by for a chat and a bite to eat could be really refreshing.

“Oh, hey, is this...?” I said, looking at the chazuke-tart-like dessert. It was topped with fruit, the same kind Man’ya had tried to give me at dinner.

“Oh, yes. Cerise-san said it’s Man’ya-chan’s favorite. It happened to be cheap at the market...” Myusel shrugged slightly. “I guess I bought a bit too much of it. I’m sorry, do you not like it?”

“No, it’s fine. Pretty much everything you make tastes great, Myusel.” Myusel could be a little awkward when it came to the laundry or the cleaning, but as far as cooking went she was something of a genius. I’d never seen her make a serious mistake in the kitchen. And by now she knew what I liked, so I’d hardly had a meal lately that I wouldn’t describe as delicious. “I was just a little surprised at how Man’ya tried to give me one at dinner.”

“She’s cute, isn’t she?” Myusel said, smiling as she set the drink and snack on the low table in front of my desk. When everything was ready, I sat on the sofa next to it, across from Myusel.

“Really... I never knew kids could be so adorable,” Myusel said fondly. “It’s the first time I’ve ever lived with a child so young.”

.....Well, this was a little unusual. Myusel tended to be shy and reserved, and rarely brought up subjects of conversation herself. As for me, I had a tendency to talk too much, like many otaku if given free rein, so Myusel ended up listening more than speaking.

“So even the people around here think lizardman kids are cute, huh?” I said.

Myusel blinked. “Huh? Yes, but of course. Shinichi-sama, you and yours don’t?”

“No, I think they’re cute.”

Even if I didn’t have any interest in making one of them my bride. Not to belittle Brooke or his family, but I felt Man’ya was cute more in the way a pet cat or dog might be, not in the “She’s *cute!*” way of interest in the opposite sex.

“Yes, of course. Shinichi-sama, you...” Suddenly Myusel blushed and looked at the ground. “You did say that you ‘feel moe’ for me and Elvia as well, didn’t you?”

“I mean, obviously. But it’s not the same as—wait, huh?” I suddenly felt like maybe we were talking past each other, but it didn’t take me long to figure out why. It was a difference of perception.

Elves like Myusel and werewolves like Elvia felt closer to lizardmen than they did to a human like me, in the sense that all of them had physical features that distinguished them from humans. In fact, when we’d first met, Myusel and Elvia had both wondered if their characteristic physical features didn’t upset or sicken me. In other words, in Myusel’s eyes, I was a human who was very generous toward people who didn’t look like me, and maybe more specifically, I seemed to be someone who could “get moe” over any girl, no matter what her background was. For that reason, maybe Myusel wouldn’t have been surprised to discover I felt romantically inclined toward Man’ya.

“I mean,” she said, “ahem... One day, Man’ya-chan will grow into —”

“Nope! Nu-uh! Not happening. I promise you. Not even a thing.” I shook my head furiously. “Myusel, when you see a little kid, don’t you —oh, you said you hadn’t gotten to spend time with a lot of kids, didn’t you? Well, say you saw a puppy or kitten, some baby animal. Wouldn’t you think it was cute? That’s what I’m feeling here. I mean, not to be impolite to Man’ya, but...”

“Oh, I see. That makes sense,” she said, and nodded. I guess it really hadn’t quite made sense to her—this girl was missing some strange bits of life experience. Then again, it sounded like she’d had a pretty rough time of it before she came here, and I’m sure she’d never been able to have a pet. Maybe she’d never learned to differentiate the finer shades of “cuteness” or “love.”

“The fact that we all have these fond feelings toward kids, even ones from other people groups, it makes me think maybe there’s something instinctive at work. Like, you see something that’s small and vulnerable and you just want to protect it.”

I thought I'd even heard stories of wild animals—I'm pretty sure it was wolves or something—raising human children. So maybe that instinct crossed species lines, too. But then, egg-laying animals tended to lay 'em and leave 'em, so maybe reptiles didn't feel the same way? And some fish even ate their young when they got stressed out. Maybe it was just mammals, after all. Brooke and Cerise didn't seem like cold, indifferent caretakers, but maybe that was because they were more than lizards—they were lizardmen, with human-like intelligence.

“*In-stinc-tive*?”

“Yeah. It means the stuff a living creature is naturally equipped with. Sort of like... The automatic workings of life, maybe.”

Apparently Myusel didn't have a concept of “instinct,” and I struggled a bit to explain. I doubted the Eldant Empire had very advanced biological or genetic sciences, and even if they did have people researching in the field, a maid like Myusel was unlikely to have encountered the discipline's specialized vocabulary.

“I just thought, the fact that you find Man'ya cute, Myusel—maybe that's instinct, too. Especially with you being a girl and all.”

“I have ‘in-stincts’ because I'm a girl?”

“No, guys have them too, but I dunno, maybe they're stronger in women. You know, the mothering impulse to raise kids.”

“Mothering...” Myusel murmured with a touch of wonderment, blinking. Then her expression suddenly changed to a regretful smile. “I... Now that you mention it, maybe you're right.”

“Huh? What's with you?”

“I just never really thought about becoming a mother before...”

“Oh...” I was suddenly tongue-tied. Myusel had spent most of her life thinking her mother had abandoned her, and the ramifications of that feeling weren't going to disappear just because she'd reconciled with Falmelle-san. Those emotions must have been buried so deeply in her that they almost felt instinctive themselves. Not to mention that if Myusel had kids—no matter who the father was—a human, an elf, or another half-elf—they would be “mixed-bloods.” I had seen some real improvements around me in racial discrimination and prejudice against mixed children, but ultimately these improvements were mostly just that: *around me*. But discrimination and prejudice in the Eldant Empire as a whole, or even in this entire world, obviously weren't going away anytime soon. So any child of Myusel's would face an uphill battle. It would be understandable if Myusel, consciously or not, didn't want to bring a child into the world who would face the same struggles she had.

“Uh, I—I guess that conversation took a bit of a weird turn,” I said, not exactly apologizing, but sort of trailing off.

“Oh, no. It’s quite all right,” Myusel replied, again with that small smile. “Recently, I’ve... well, it’s crossed my mind.”

“What’s crossed your mind?”

“I’ve wondered... what it might feel like to become a mother.” She sounded so shy. She put her hands on her knees and refused to meet my eyes. Then I actually heard her knees brushing against each other.

Ahhhh... So c-c-c-uuuuuuute! Seriously, this girl is just always—!



She hardly even knew she was doing it; it just came naturally to her. It was downright terrifying how adorable she could be. And considering she had reiterated her feelings for me more than once recently, I couldn't brush it off with a "Ha ha ha, *like* and *love* are different things!" anymore. And if Myusel was thinking about becoming a mother, you had to assume she figured the baby would have a father. And that father might be... Well...

.....

I pictured Myusel holding a little black-haired baby. She turned and smiled at me: "He looks just like you, dear."

.....

Hnnngghhhhh?!

I was almost overwhelmed by the force of my own fantasy.

No way! Was such a future really possible?! Could a former shut-in and nasty otaku like me actually, like, do that over-18-only stuff with an actual 3D girl? Let alone one as perfect and gorgeous as this?! Would such a future be permitted to the likes of me?!

Wait—was this being a "damn real"? Was this what being one of those felt like?!

I could only flounder, assailed by unfamiliar feelings...

"So, uh, sorry, I know this is kind of crass," I said, grasping at any possible subject to ward off the sickening silence, "but your kid would be, like, a quarter-elf, right? Is that even a thing?"

Forget the damn-real business. Given that humans and elves were different races, a child between the two of them would be, in the biological sense, a hybrid. These exist in nature, too, and can even be created by artificially cross-breeding different species. One of the most famous examples is probably the Liger, a cross between a lion and a tiger. Incidentally, the term Liger is for when the father is a lion and the mother is a tiger. When it's the other way around, it's called a Tigon—apparently. Other famous hybrids include the so-called *aigamo* (a cross between a mallard and a domestic duck), or the *inobuta*, a hybrid of a wild boar and the domestic pig. And we can't forget the mule.

Having said all that, artificially created hybrids often lack the ability to reproduce, so they only exist for a single generation. If anything like that applied to half-elves, then it wouldn't even be possible for Myusel to become a mother. Plenty of hybrids could reproduce, though, so you couldn't jump to any conclusions. I wondered what the story was with elves as far as this went.

"Er, yes, sir, although of course you very rarely hear about them, let alone see them..." Myusel said, completely straight-faced. "But I have heard tell of children born to half-elves and either humans or

other elves.”

“Huh. Well, that’s, uh, good, I guess,” I said. “That means you really can be a mother, Myusel. Hmm. That’s great. What a relief.”

“.....Oh.” It seemed to register with Myusel why I had asked what I had. She looked at the floor again, the blush going all the way up to the tips of her ears this time.

Ahhh, with a reaction like that, I can’t—even I could hardly—ahhhh!

I didn’t say anything.

She didn’t say anything.

The strange silence filled the space between us. I suddenly thought I saw my proverbial shoulder angel and shoulder devil smirking at each other over my head.

“Now’s your chance! Shove her onto that sofa!” my shoulder devil (who looked like Hikaru-san) said.

“Don’t do that! Illicit sexual relations and premarital sex are for bad boys only!” said my shoulder angel (Minori-san), with her arms crossed. The two of them circled my head like they were on a merry-go-round. “Just FYI,” she added, “getting it on with another guy would be A-OK!”

I was starting to wonder if she was really an angel, or if they were actually both devils... *Hang on, aren’t they both supposed to look like me, anyway?!*

“Oh—”

“Oh...”

Both of us, each hoping to break the ice again, looked up at the same time—with the result that we were suddenly staring into each other’s eyes, and things only got even more awkward. I couldn’t seem to tear my eyes away from Myusel’s blushing face. Her own eyes looked a little damp—*Huh?* Was this, like, you know, in the saying? The one that says a man who doesn’t eat a meal set out before him is no man? Was this one of those things where if I didn’t make a move, I’d actually hurt Myusel really deeply, and suddenly be on a one-way route to the bad ending? *Huh?!* Why did I feel like my choices had narrowed down to one?! The save point! Where was the save point?!

Ahhhhhhh!!

I had to do something. I had to do *something*. But what? For an otaku whose number of years without a girlfriend exactly equaled his number of years of being alive, I felt up against the wall, hardly able to even think. My head was spinning: *Could it really happen here? Now?* And then I thought I saw Hikaru-san’s grinning face. It was all immensely confusing. And finally...

She didn’t say anything.

I didn’t say anything.

We both just sat there on the sofas, intensely, painfully aware of

each other.



Her pale skin almost seemed to glow in the low light.

“Shinichi-sama...” Lying on the bed, Myusel said my name, her cheeks flushing faintly. Naked as the day she was born, she wasn’t even wearing her headdress, the very proof of her maid-ness, and we’d removed the ribbon that had held back her bundle of long hair. It was splayed over the bed now, gossamer against the pillows and sheets.

“U—Um, please... don’t look too hard...” She put one hand over her chest and reached the other down between her legs, just managing to hide her modesty. But only just: her arms were shaking. The pink flush of embarrassment gave her entire body a willowy grace, while the way she pushed down on her chest and between her legs only emphasized their softness, made it all the more clear that despite how slim she was, she also had just the right curves. A desire welled up within me to take those curves in my hands, to squeeze them, to savor the feeling of them under my fingers.

“What can I say...?” Even I thought it was a bit twisted, but I had to say what was in my head. “You’re lovely. Absolutely beautiful. Cute.”

“Er... Oh. Th-Thank you... s-sir...” Myusel said, squirming a little as though rubbing her hand between her legs. The show of shyness was delightful in its own way. I lowered myself over her, carefully, slowly, so I wouldn’t put too much weight on her. Before anything else, I wanted to feel her skin against mine. I wanted the distance between us to be as close to nothing as possible.

She was warm. At our stomachs, at our hips, it felt like our bodies were melting into each other. And yet even at that moment, I felt impatient. The impatience wouldn’t go away. And so...

“Myusel...”

“Y-Yes...?”

I brought my face close to hers. She must have understood what I wanted, for after a moment’s look of surprise, she slowly closed her eyes. The delicate, pink lips that had once held themselves carefully aloof now seemed to invite me onward. They opened ever so slightly, searching for me, and I felt my mind spin with excitement. She wasn’t rejecting me. In fact, she wanted me.

You might be surprised to know, but even up to that very moment there had always been a part of me that was afraid Myusel would suddenly say, “You know what, I don’t think so,” or “You’re just not my type.” But it was okay. This was all right. I could become one with her. She wanted it, too. And when I realized that, I felt it grow harder

and harder—my pulse, I mean.

“Shinichi-sama...”

“Yes?”

“I—” Myusel almost moaned the word, her breath quickening. “I want your child, Shinichi-sama... Your baby...”

My heart gave another leap. A wide range of possible replies flashed through my mind, from the truly nasty to the romantic comedy-esque. But in the end, none of them seemed appropriate. Instead I answered with a non-answer, words that were overused but straight from my heart. “Myusel, I love you.”

“Yes, sir...” Tiny droplets slipped from the corners of her tight-shut eyes. I was so close to her, they seemed to be just past the tip of my nose. And then I pressed my lips to her trembling mouth...



“.....Yep. That’s how it went,” I mumbled, gazing vacantly up at the ceiling. A thin shaft of fresh morning light sneaked in between the curtains, and I could see dust dancing in the air. The gradually rising temperature must have set the air in the room moving. “That’s how the dream went. And now it’s over.”

.....

.....

.....Ahhhhhhhhh!!

Yes, you heard me. It was a dream, all just in my stupid, stinking unconscious head. Damn, dang, darn, *kusoooooo!!*

“Urrrh...”

Needless to say, in short, in other words, the whole scene of me bedding Myusel had been a fantasy in my sleeping brain. It had seemed so real—it was like I could still feel her skin under my hands. But that only made the disappointment when I woke up so much worse... I could practically hear someone crowing, “You thought you got a happy ending? Sucks to be you! It was all just a dream!”

The *real* Myusel, after our awkward little chat the day before, had insisted that the tea was cold and she would make fresh, then virtually fled the room. And she did bring back fresh, hot tea, but by then it was both of us who had cooled down, and although things still felt a bit weird between us, nothing else happened.

In other words, nothing to see here, folks, move along. I guess my feelings of disappointment over that fact had inspired my dream. It was seriously way more realistic than I’d ever asked for, right down to the warmth and softness of her flesh. It was all a little too stimulating for a virgin like me...

“It’s like, I could press my fingers into her and she was soft, but

there was still that resistance...”

“Mn...”

“Yeah, just like that. It was so real...” And then I stopped.

“Huh...?”

I was supposed to have woken up from my dream, but that feeling, achingly plausible, was still there under my fingers—in fact, in the entire palm of my hand. But why?!

“Mn.....” someone groaned from beside me.

I heard a screeching string orchestra in my head as I turned to look. I could see a pale back. Like whoever it was had just turned over in their sleep.

“Huh...?”

What was with this smooth, soft-looking back?! And another question: what I could see of the back—which was just down to the waist; everything below that was hidden under the sheets—but what I could see looked like—well, it was clearly—this was a girl’s—

“Wh-Wh—Whooooaaaaaa?!” I exclaimed, somewhere between a scream and a yell. It was a back, a girl’s back, a *naked* girl’s back! B-A-C-K BACK! I could see the nape of the neck, a few stray hairs lying across the skin, the smooth lines that swept down from the neck, all so deeply, deeply erotic even just lying there. And while I was confronting this naked back, I had also just woken up in the morning, and my lower half was doing what it did every morning—something completely inexcusable!

No! Not the point!

So, uh, um, what I felt a moment ago, was that *not* the last vestiges of my dream, but—you know, er, could it possibly be—did I have that kind of dream because I could feel that skin while I was sleeping? Wait... was it actually a dream at all?! Could it possibly be that I—did I really—did *we* really—did Myusel and I—*did* we?!

Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What am I gonna do? I mean, no, I don’t exactly regret it, but is this really okay? Is this allowed? A worthless otaku former home security guard like me and a beautiful woman like Myusel...?

“Shinichi-sama...” As I lay there feeling like I was about to burst, there was a voice on the far side of the door. “Good morning, sir.”

“Oh, Myusel,” I said reflexively, “good—”

Huh?

Myusel was on the *other* side of the door. So... who was in bed next to me?!

Wait—I had another problem.

“I’m coming in, sir.”

I’d answered Myusel instinctively, and she’d taken that as permission to come in. Now she was about to open the door.

“Um... Shinichi-sama,” she said as she entered. She didn’t seem to

notice me goggling, just came in with a cart stacked with the usual morning preparations—my clothes for the day, a bowl of water for me to wash my face, and so on. “Er, about yesterday...”

She had her eyes down, so she hadn’t yet noticed I wasn’t the only one in the bed.

“Y-Yeah, yesterday! Yesterday, yeah!” I said, frantically pulling up the sheets in hopes of hiding whoever was next to me. “Uh, gee, that tea yesterday sure was good! M-Maybe you can make it again sometime?”

“What? Oh, yes,” Myusel said, nodding, although she looked taken aback. She probably wanted to talk about that whole discussion over tea last night, but I was eager to get the chat over and her out of there as quickly as possible.

I felt a shifting under the sheets beside me. I forced myself to smile as I reached out to hold back whoever it was. “Uh, you can just leave the stuff there! I’ll be down for breakfast in a second! Okay?”

“Er, of—of course,” Myusel said, a cloud passing over her face. She had probably realized I was deliberately avoiding the subject of that uncomfortable chat the night before. But under the circumstances, letting this go on could be even worse. It might even—

“Ungh...!”

The someone I was pressing against shifted again.

Okay, it’s worse now!

And then...

“Mrf...”

The sheets went *shwmpf*, and who should appear but—

“Huh?” I said dumbly—or was it Myusel?

Neither of us had expected the person we saw.

Namely...

“Clara?!”

“Good morning...”

Clara, the weretiger soldier from the kingdom of Bahairam, stretched without the slightest hint of embarrassment. The sheets slipped off her, revealing not just her shoulders, but her modest (a polite expression) chest, her toned abs, and even her adorable belly button...! Okay, so everything below her waist was technically still covered, but this was more than enough to say “*Don’t worry, I’m not wearing any.*”

“Shinichi-sama...!” Myusel’s eyes went wide as she looked from me to Clara and back. And then I saw them start to brim with tears...

“No, wait, you’ve got it all wrong!” I wailed. “This isn’t—I mean, it’s not—we didn’t do anything *wrong*, okay? Or at least, I think we didn’t! I wasn’t, like, trying to chase you out of my room, although admittedly it’s a fact that I knew this would be trouble if you saw it

and ahhhhh!" I was getting so overexcited even I wasn't sure what I was saying anymore. Finally...

"What's going on? Did something happen?" In the doorway behind Myusel appeared—

"Amatena?!" She was Clara's military superior, a palette-swapped version of Elvia—er, I mean, one of Elvia's older sisters. I hadn't seen her in a while. "What? Huh? Why?!"

Why were these two here? Yes, they had once hidden out in our mansion when things had gotten too hot in Bahairam, but they were both members of the Bahairamanian military; that is to say, enemy agents from the viewpoint of the hostile Eldant Empire. They couldn't just waltz in here anytime they liked.

"I have another question: Clara, what are you doing?" Amatena said, giving her subordinate a skeptical look. She'd once given Clara specific orders to worm her way into my affections, so it didn't seem to faze her to discover Clara naked in my bed.

"Ma'am. I am attempting to secure Shinichi-sama's cooperation by presenting him with a *fait accompli*," she said expressionlessly. "I have observed this tactic in Ja-panese works. I believe the expression is *honey trap*."

"I see. Good work."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Hold on a second!" I wailed. They sounded like this was all completely ordinary. "What's going on here? What is *actually* going on here?!"

"Shinichi," Amatena said. "We have a favor to ask of you." She squeezed past Myusel and into the room, stopping next to my bed. "Or perhaps more accurately, there is something we *must* ask you to attend to. Urgently, at that."

"A favor...? Urgently?"

Neither Amatena nor Clara were the most expressive people in the world, but Amatena looked even more grave than usual—maybe even almost cornered. Then she glanced back over her shoulder at Myusel and said, "We've come at the urging of Falmelle Faugron."

Myusel stood frozen with shock. "What...?"

Chapter Two: Go West, Amutech

All of us except Brooke's family were gathered in the living room. We'd decided to leave out the lizardmen because we had a feeling that this discussion wasn't going to be something kids should hear. Man'ya and the others might be too young to even understand adult conversations yet, but lizardmen grew fast, and I didn't want to take any chances.

So Hikaru-san, Minori-san, and I were all present, along with Myusel, Elvia, Amatena, and Clara. Normally Myusel would be helping to host, but since this had to do with Falmelle-san, she was sitting beside me instead.

I looked at Amatena, then Clara, and finally said, "So what is this all about?" Both of them appeared just a little more tired than the last time I had seen them. It wasn't like their cheeks were sallow or something, but there wasn't as much strength in their eyes, and their movements seemed slower, fatigued. Of course, on one level, it made sense: apparently they'd traveled at a forced march for three days and nights to get here.

They had arrived at the mansion early this morning, before the sun was even up. They had been able to ride a puppet drake (a new kind of weapon developed by Bahairam that involved using a magical spike to control a dragon) until just past the mountains that formed the border between our nations, but the second half of the journey had been on foot. It might be possible to hide a puppet drake during the night, but they would be spotted in a second during the day. And then the jig would be up. The Eldant authorities were well aware of this new technology, and if it was seen anywhere around, it could all too easily spark a border war.

Wisely not wanting to make things with the Eldant Empire any worse, Amatena and Clara had crossed the border before sunup, then landed the drake just on the other side of the mountains, after which they had had to walk—or rather, run, all the way to the mansion. A solid day at top speed.

I felt tired just hearing about it. A full marathon was 42.195 kilometers, and the world record for running that distance was something in the neighborhood of two hours. Celebrity participants could take four or five hours to finish one. Even purely in terms of time, running an entire day would be several times that number of

hours. And without any guarantee of food or water along the way, the toll on your body could be tremendous.

It would have killed a normal human, I was sure. If they could even actually run for that long, which most couldn't. Amatena and Clara might have been beast people, with all the superb physical abilities that entailed, but before they were even soldiers they were women, and anyway, running literally all night long sounded like insanity to me no matter who you were. Naturally, they were exhausted by the time they got here.

And then they were noticed by the security devices the JSDF had set up around the house. Minori-san had rushed outside the moment she received the notification that intruders had been detected, only to find Amatena and Clara unconscious on the grounds of the mansion. Perhaps they had finally begun to relax when they realized they had reached their destination.

Hearing what they had been through, Minori-san's first move was to give them somewhere to recuperate. She woke Elvia to help her, and the two of them had brought Amatena and Clara inside. They'd put them in a single room together, but the two of them had recovered quicker than expected—and when Elvia took her eyes off them for an instant, Clara darted out of the room and into my bed. (I swear this is all true. At least, I think.) Thanks to their time hiding out here, the two of them knew the layout of the mansion. Including the location of my room.

But still... “So you ran all night and collapsed in our front yard. I got that part. But I still don't know why. What's going on that you had to come here so urgently?”

Amatena and Clara looked at each other. They appeared to be hesitating, but it seemed a little late for that. What could they be thinking about?

“This matter concerns military secrets of the Kingdom of Bahairam,” Amatena said with a small sigh. “If at all possible, I'd like to refrain from speaking about them to anyone except you, Shinichi.”

“Sounds like I'd better show myself out,” Hikaru-san said with a shrug. Minori-san stood up, too. But Amatena looked at them and said, “No. It's all right.” Maybe she was grateful for Minori-san's help, or maybe her experience hiding out here had convinced her that anyone in this mansion deserved a certain measure of trust. Whatever the case, she looked back at me. “In the Third Capital of our kingdom, there's a facility called the Dragon's Den.”

“The Third Capital? What's that? Do you have several capital cities?”

After all, wouldn't a Third Capital imply the existence of a First and a Second? Although if you defined the capital of a kingdom as

where the king resided, it seemed kind of counterintuitive to have several of them, like an animal with more than one head.

“The capital of our kingdom is relocated from time to time,” Amatenā explained. “We were once a nomadic people, with scant connection to residence in any one area. Now, nomads account for less than half of our population, but the custom of periodically moving the capital to a new location remains.”

“Sounds like a lot of work,” I said. “Or maybe not? I mean, if that’s the custom, do you go out of your way to have easy-to-move capital cities?”

When I thought about it, I remembered seeing the King of Bahairam come all the way out to a regional town to bless a local mass wedding. If the people of Bahairam used to be nomads, maybe such a light-footed king was just what you would expect.

The Dragon’s Den, by the way, was one of the most closely guarded military secrets in Bahairam, and had apparently been where it was long before the Third Capital got there. It was almost as if the city that had grown up around the Den to service and defend it had been recognized as the Third Capital for its importance. In short, the Third Capital was not a location with particular significance for the Bahairamanian royal family. Rather, it seemed the rulers made their capitals in places of military, political, or economic importance, moving from one to the next in turn. Honestly, it struck me as kind of a strange system.

“Hold on a second,” Minori-san said, frowning. “The country’s biggest military secret? And it’s called the Dragon’s Den? Is that *dragon* as in ‘drake’? Like, puppet drake?”

“It is. I should have known you would figure it out,” Amatenā said, crossing her arms. She seemed impressed by Minori-san’s quick wit, but I wasn’t sure what it was she had figured out. If the Dragon’s Den was where the dragons were, and the dragons were actually puppet drakes... did that mean the Den was a puppet drake factory?

“How’s that work?” I asked. “I thought the factory for the puppet drakes was near the border, where I was held last time. Was that the Third Capital?”

“No, that was somewhere else,” Amatenā started, but then she slapped her hand over her mouth. I guess she was still trying to decide exactly how much secret military information to divulge in front of all these people.

Minori-san spoke up instead. “Didn’t you think it was strange, Shinichi-kun?” She was smiling slightly.

“What? Think what was strange?”

“Puppet drakes are dragons with magical control spikes buried in them, right?”

“Buried? More like pounded into them, but sure...”

Those dragons had massive spikes (like, “Hello! I’m definitely stabbing this thing in the brain!” massive) in their foreheads, so that if you only saw their heads, they might look less like dragons and more like unicorns. The spikes involved complicated, delicate magical spells that allowed the dragons to be controlled by an outside operator, but I questioned the way they pretty much screamed *weak point*. Of course, this world didn’t really have any weapons that were precise enough to target that “horn” as the dragon flew through the sky.

Anyway...

“How do you think those dragons got there?”

“Oh...”

Now that she mentioned it, it was obvious. The Holy Eldant Empire was well aware of how dangerous dragons were. They were quasi-sprites, creatures that fed on magical energy, so powerful spells had minimal effect on them. That was on top of their immense natural strength and huge size. Plus they could fly.

So magical firepower didn’t work on them, they were too big to fight with swords or spears, and they could just fly over any traps you set. Tough nut to crack, dragons. Having one go on a rampage would be a serious problem, to put it mildly; it would require several squadrons of knights and huge casualties as you tried to wear the creature down. All excellent reasons to avoid these monsters—and the very same reasons why Bahairam had developed the puppet drake as their newest weapon.

But think about it: to get puppet drakes, first you needed dragons... and how had Bahairam gotten its hands on those? They’d be useless dead, but capturing one alive had to be even more difficult than just killing it. The dragon I’d seen looked like it had been sedated with some kind of drug, but then, if it were that easy, Eldant wouldn’t have struggled with these monsters the way they did. All of which meant...

“No way... The Dragon’s Den...” It slowly dawned on me: the name meant exactly what it said.

“That’s correct. We obtain newborn dragon pups from the Den and spike them to create our puppet drakes.”

“Newborn? You mean, like, newly hatched?”

Come to think of it, on earth we sometimes spoke of “captive born” animals. Many wild animals are difficult to breed because they don’t flourish in captivity. So sometimes, you can find an egg that has already been laid, or has just hatched, and bring up that specimen under supervision, making sure any and all the infants survive.

Survival rates into adulthood are pretty poor for a lot of animals. Depending on species, as many as 90% of animals who are born can

succumb to illness, starvation, or predators. So protecting and raising a clutch of newborns can get you a lot more animals than you would ever find in the wild.

“But I’m sure I saw full-grown dragons,” I said. The puppet drake I saw under production—or was that preparation?—had looked plenty big to me. Or had it still been a child? “If those were the kids, how big are the eggs?” I didn’t even want to think about how dragons might manage to lay eggs that big. To accommodate a dragon almost your own size inside the body would mean a massive increase in body size. I didn’t think dragons’ scales looked that flexible—but then again, snakes could swallow whole animals that were larger than themselves.

While I was contemplating all this, Amatena said, “No. Dragons aren’t born from eggs.”

“Huh? They aren’t?” I blinked. That caught me by surprise. Lizardmen came from eggs, and they were reptile(-ish) creatures just like dragons, weren’t they? I had just assumed... “So then... Don’t tell me dragon parents go through live births?”

“Wrong again.” Amatena shook her head. “Dragons are born by the Dragon’s Den.”

I looked at her quizzically. I was lost again.

The Den itself gave birth to them? For a second, I thought maybe my interpreter ring was malfunctioning. From how Amatena had been talking right up till now, I had assumed the Dragon’s Den was the name of a Bahairamanian military facility, or maybe a geographical location. Was I wrong? Or was there maybe a momma dragon that had been given the same name as the place she lived?

“Hang on...” I said. Could it be that dragons, like ants and bees, had a queen who lived in a nest, giving birth to babies? I suddenly imagined a scene as if out of a certain movie, of a dragon queen pumping out one egg after another. So did that mean—you know? That in the end, there would be a knock-down, drag-out fight with a yellow, bipedal load lifter on a spaceship somewhere? Or would there be a revived turtle monster who struck the final blow and then exploded?

“To be completely honest, I don’t know the details myself. This is as classified as secrets get. A special military unit called the Undertakers oversees the Dragon’s Den. They belong to an entirely different command structure from the likes of me and Clara,” Amatena said. “What matters is, we get newborn dragons from the Den and turn them into puppet drakes. But even newborn dragons are roughly the size you saw. They don’t get much smaller or larger.”

“Really?”

“Because they’re part sprite. They differ substantially from ordinary living beings.”

“Ah...” Now that I thought about it, it made sense: my understanding was that the sprites of this world were conglomerations of dense magical energy that took on the appearance of living things, but they weren’t biological creatures in the way any of us were. It only made sense if their growth didn’t follow the patterns I expected.

“All right, whatever we do or don’t know about puppet drakes,” Hikaru-san said, trying to move the conversation along, “what does this secret military base have to do what you want from Shinichi-san?”

“Y-Yes, and—!” Myusel leaned forward as if she could hardly hold herself back. “My mother... How is she connected to all this?”

“Yes, my apologies for getting off subject,” Amatena said with a look at the rest of us. “To return to the point. Falmelle Faugron was, from what I can tell, making some sort of delivery to the Undertakers at the Dragon’s Den. I doubt it was anything secret in and of itself—more likely daily necessities and consumables. There are many merchants who see nation as no hindrance to business, and it would appear Falmelle Faugron—or perhaps I should say Faugron & Associates—is one of them. As this was their first transaction with the Undertakers, Falmelle Faugron herself accompanied the delivery to see everything went smoothly.”

“I see...”

Falmelle-san looked exactly like Myusel, but their personalities were almost exact opposites. Falmelle-san was a strong woman, a real go-getter, you might say. I could definitely picture her doing business with Bahairam, and also going along to see the place for herself.

“Now...” Amatena said, and heaved a sigh. That was unusual for her. Despite her resemblance to Elvia, she very rarely let her emotions show. She was the classic soldier, an “iron woman” who barely made a peep no matter how difficult things got. “There was an incident at the Third Capital. Or I suppose I should call it a disaster.”

“Incident? Disaster?” Minori-san asked, frowning. “It’s a military base, right?”

“Yes. But this doesn’t appear to have been an attack by Eldant or any other enemy nation. It seems to have come from within—indeed, from inside the Dragon’s Den. I’m not going to pretend to understand it. The scene was chaos.”

According to what Amatena told us next, it had started with an earthquake, after which the entire Third Capital, beginning with the Dragon’s Den at its center, erupted with pillars of flame, in dozens—no, hundreds—maybe even thousands?—of places, all at the same time. Fire damage to the capital was obviously extensive, buildings were burned down, and several areas of the city were cut off from each other.

“Earthquakes? Fire?” I asked. “Is it possible the Third Capital was in a volcanic area?”

Amatena shook her head. “There are no volcanoes near it. There had been reports of earthquakes just prior to this, but that area hasn’t customarily been the site of much seismic activity.”

Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and I all looked at each other. Earthquakes were old hat for us, coming from Japan; they happened much more frequently there than in most places in the West. Certain parts of Japan were known as “the land of fire,” and I had to think this wasn’t unrelated to the number of volcanoes in the country. Although they had a nice side benefit in giving us lots of hot springs.

Anyway, if there had been a volcano near the Third Capital, that might have been one possibility. I didn’t get the impression that seismology or volcanology were big things in this world, and to people who didn’t know any better, I had figured a volcanic eruption could just look like fire shooting out of the ground. But according to Amatena, there was nothing of the sort in the vicinity.

“So these pillars of flame began sprouting up around the city...”

“Hm?” I said with a frown. There was something about the way she said that, something about the expression that nagged me. “Pillars of flame? You mean there was no lava, or drifting embers or whatever?”

“*Lah-vah?*” Amatena asked, glancing at Clara.

Huh? She didn’t know what lava was? But that would mean...

“It’s like a superhot river. Melted rock turns red and flows along.”

“No, that’s not what happened. There were massive fires all throughout town, but nothing like what you’re describing.”

I didn’t react immediately. What was this? It certainly didn’t sound like any eruption I’d ever heard of.

“When attempts were made to put out the flames, we found the wells had dried up and there was no water. Some people attempted to spread sand on the fires, but they were much too large for that to be effective. And in the middle of all of this, Falmelle Faugron said something to me.” She looked directly at me as she spoke. Yes, her face looked like Elvia’s, but her brusque manner made the stern expression seem more at home. It was a blessing in its own way to be glared at by her—Wait, maybe this wasn’t the time for that. “Shinichi, she said that if I brought you to Bahairam, things would be resolved.”

“Me? Why me?” I was sure no fireman, and disaster policy wasn’t exactly my strong suit, either. What did she want from a former home security guard otaku?

“Shinichi-sama, remember that my mother has the gift of foresight,” Myusel said. That’s right... That’s right. Falmelle-san possessed a very special magic—almost a psychic power, from what

I'd heard. The ability to see the future. It certainly gave her a leg up in business. Maybe she had a shrine maiden somewhere back there in her ancestry.

"And this magic, it's telling her that I can solve this problem? This was a prophecy?"

"It appears so," Amatena said with a nod. She said that while everyone else in the area had been busy running away, Falmelle-san had issued a prophecy.

"Shinichi." Amatena got to her feet and bowed deeply to me, bending almost in half. "I'm begging you. Come back with me. I'm abundantly aware that it's outrageous for me to ask this of someone associated with the Eldant Empire. But Bahairam's citizens are going to be caught up in this one way or another, and Falmelle Faugron and her staff are trapped at the scene with no way to escape. I'm asking you to help them."

"Big Sis Ama..." Elvia looked startled; I guess her older sister didn't beg very often.

Amatena and I had a history—specifically, a history where she kidnapped me and threatened to drive a spike into my head to turn me into a magical puppet—but to be perfectly honest, I didn't have such a bad impression of Elvia's older sister. She was even helping with my covert importing of otaku products into Bahairam—my cultural invasion, if you will—and I thought of her more as a friend than an enemy. Not to mention, it was Myusel's mother she was asking me to help. I could hardly just say I didn't feel like it.

And yet... Me? Really? Not to brag, but I was just a perfectly ordinary person. Like I've said, I didn't have any psychic powers or special combat abilities, or any experience rescuing people from natural disasters. I mean *nothing*. Sure, I adored *Thunde*birds* and had seen every episode of both the old and new series, plus the movies. And I was a fan of *Umi***** and the *Tomika Her**s* shows. But if that was all it took, we could all be top-notch martial artists just by reading some fighting manga.

Seriously, what was I supposed to do?

"Please..." Amatena bowed even deeper, and then Clara, next to her, did the same.

"Shinichi-sama..." Clara even took a step forward and knelt in front of me, clutching my hand. "I'll do anything if you'll help us."

"Wh-What do you mean by... anything?"

"*Anything*," she said, more emphatically this time.

"Hey, um, er... You don't have to do, you know... *anything*," I said, my heart starting to pound at the feeling of the warm, delicate fingers—so slim you would never have believed they belonged to a soldier—around mine.

Clara had already been tasked once with trying to cultivate my affections, so was it my fault if when she said “*anything*” that way, I started to imagine some less than wholesome stuff? *Just calm down, my son.*

“Are you not satisfied with me?”

“Er, that’s not the point...”

“A-Ahem, Clara-san, this also concerns my mother,” Myusel said, getting up with noticeable haste. “If Shinichi-sama must be begged, then, er, I should—!”

“Stop that, Myusel, you don’t have to get all excited!”

It’s not like I wouldn’t be grateful for some naughty expressions of gratitude—in fact, I was thrilled with the idea—but bringing it up right here in front of everyone, with Minori-san and Hikaru-san watching? Maybe that wasn’t the best plan!

“So what if *I* beg ya?” Elvia asked, jumping to her feet. Her tail was wagging enthusiastically for some reason. Come to think of it, was it about “that day” for her?

“This has nothing to do with you, Elvia!”

“True... Shinichi is right. If anyone is to *beg*, it should be me.” Amatenā clenched her fists and looked very determined.

“You don’t have to do that, Amatenā!” I practically screamed. “Fine, I get it, I’ll go!” I said, feeling oddly as though I’d been manipulated by Clara into the whole thing.



“You don’t look well, sir,” Captain Satou said from beside me, where he was driving the LAV. He was the commander of the JSDF garrison here in this other world. He was also going to be my bodyguard for the duration of my stay. I was given to understand he was an exceptional soldier, as evidenced by the Ranger patch on his uniform, and indeed he’d given me nothing to complain about so far. He had proven something of a reticent man who wasn’t quick to start conversations, which meant I must have looked especially serious. “Is it bad news?” he asked.

“Does it look that grim?” I asked with a wry grin. “I must be losing my touch.”

Captain Satou didn’t say anything, but looked at me with a smile that might have been amused or might have been pained. He clearly understood it was not his job to ferret out all the details of what was going on. That was an appropriate attitude for my bodyguard. Very appropriate. If a soldier like him let personal feelings or curiosity get the better of him, he might find himself unable to do his duty. In that respect, I felt Koganuma-kun, who acted as Shinichi-kun’s bodyguard,

was not always careful enough. Indeed, was often quite careless.

“To be honest, I’m rather surprised.” The words came out of my mouth almost before I knew I was saying them.

“Surprised, sir?” Captain Satou asked.

“Maybe I’ve been around Shinichi-kun and Koganuma-kun too long. I find myself fond of them despite it all. Maybe familiarity doesn’t breed contempt after all. I’m not sure that’s a good thing for a civil servant.”

Captain Satou didn’t say anything, affirmative or negative.

As a government official, I had to avoid letting my judgment be influenced by personal feelings, either good or bad. And I couldn’t favor certain people over others. That was one thing Captain Satou and I had in common. But we were both humans, not machines; and in fact, unfeeling machines—machines divorced from and unable to understand human psychology—probably wouldn’t make very good civil servants. The emphasis was on *servants*: we served the public, and it would do none of us any good to completely ignore the wishes of our clientele.

It was a difficult balance. A true challenge.

“Yes. I have become closer to them than necessary, I’m afraid. Them, and—”

At that moment, I saw something rush past the LAV’s small window. They looked like humans with animal ears and tails, so-called beast people. These were just children, one boy and one girl. Their exceptional physical abilities meant that they could easily keep pace with an automotive vehicle running along an unpaved road at less than thirty kilometers per hour.

“I’m sorry, sir, but may I take a moment?” Captain Satou said suddenly. “I know them.”

“Hmm? It’s all right,” I said, checking my watch, and Captain Satou stopped the LAV and opened the door.

“Satou!” the beast boy and girl exclaimed, rushing toward the vehicle.

The captain greeted them with a smile. “What’s up?”

“Satou, do you have any—you know?”

“Yeah, we want some of that stuff!”

“If you give it to us, we’ll share the next wild rabbit we catch with you!”

“Please?”

The boy and girl were tugging insistently on Captain Satou’s sleeve.

Captain Satou scratched the back of his head, but he smiled.

“Huh, guess you’ve got me. They’re not easy to come by, though, all right?” Then he pulled something out of a bag, something shaped like

a thin card.

“Hooray!”

“Thanks!”

The boy and girl whooped with glee and then nodded their appreciation before they dashed off again.

“Sorry for the delay, sir,” Captain Satou said, closing the door and starting the vehicle again.

“What’s that you gave them?” I asked. “You know we have to be cautious giving the locals products from Japan...”

Careless distribution of Japanese goods could lead to real trouble, as we’d learned the hard way when Hikaru-kun first came here. And if we just passed out chocolates like the old occupation troops in Japan, without first understanding how they might affect the people here, there was no telling what harm might be done to them. As I said, the children we’d just seen looked largely human, but had animal traits as well. Wasn’t chocolate supposed to be fatal to dogs and cats?

“These, sir,” Captain Satou replied, producing the object from his bag again. To my surprise, they were packages of flavored nori seaweed. “All-natural ingredients. Koganuma reports they don’t seem to cause any problems.”

“Color me surprised.”

“There’s no ocean for quite a ways around here. And rocksalt is a luxury ingredient. These seaweed sheets are a special treat for the kids and help them get sodium,” the captain smiled.

“I see... It would seem interaction with the local populace is coming along quite nicely.”

“That was part of our orders, sir.”

Yes. The soldiers had been strongly encouraged to cultivate ties with the locals. Leaving all of our interactions with the Eldant Empire to Shinichi-kun alone would have been all kinds of dangerous, in my judgment, and my superiors concurred. They were even more convinced after his little “rebellion.” Hence, in addition to requesting reports on everything the JSDF could tell us about, we instructed them to interact with local civilians.

“Sorry, sir. Was the nori going too far?” Captain Satou asked.

“No. We did tell you to. However...”

Suddenly I found myself picturing the other-worlders who lived at Shinichi-kun’s mansion, as well as the adorable empress at Eldant Castle, and all her servants. The fact that, when I pictured them, they were all smiling was evidence that they had a certain affection for me as well.

To be honest, it surprised me. I had always thought myself a somewhat less engaging person than that. But perhaps these feelings were exactly why the idea of seeing Shinichi-kun left me with such a

weight on my shoulders. With no concern for my worries, though, the vehicle kept rolling on...

"We've arrived, sir," Captain Satou said, bringing the LAV to a halt. I climbed out of the vehicle and looked up at Amutech's—but in practice, really Shinichi-kun's—mansion.

If some of the local people were fond of me, they must have been downright in love with Shinichi-kun, considering he was here all the time, and had been for quite a while. It seemed that the girls in this house—Myusel and Elvia, I seemed to remember their names being—truly respected him, and Her Majesty the Empress was on quite friendly terms with him. Knowing Shinichi-kun's personality, how could they not come to care about him?

So naturally, I felt most unpleasant as I gazed at the house, and then at Eldant Castle towering beyond.

Just then, though, I was startled by a bird-drawn carriage that clattered up from behind the house. "What?!"

The carriage came at me so quickly I thought it might run me over. I jumped back at the same moment I saw Captain Satou pull a Type-89 machine gun out of the LAV and take aim.

But I said, "Shinichi-kun?!" To my shock, sitting on the driver's bench of the carriage were Myusel Fourant and Shinichi-kun himself. It was the half-elf girl holding the reins—come to think of it, I recalled she had spent a stint in the military long ago. Perhaps, just as members of the Ground Self-Defense Force frequently needed driver's licenses, she had had to learn how to maneuver one of these carriages.

"What is the meaning of this, Shinichi-kun?!" I demanded.

"Matoba-san, is that you? Perfect!" Shinichi-kun called back from the carriage, which had ground to a halt just beyond me. "Sorry for the trouble, but I need you to tell Petralka I'll be away for a while!"

"What? Be away? Where exactly are you going? Anyway, I want to—"

"And tell the school to just have the kids study on their own!" Before he was done talking, the carriage was already on its way again. I chased after it for a few steps, shouting, "Hold it right there! What in the world do you think you're—"

"We've got a rescue mission! Myusel's mother!"

"What?!" I stopped in my tracks, completely flabbergasted. Now the carriage was going too fast for anyone to catch it on foot. It was already growing smaller in the distance. I could shout, but there was no way he would hear me.

"Should we go after him, sir?" Captain Satou asked, coming up beside me.

I shook my head. "No. I can't say I understand what's going on, but I have the distinct impression it would be useless to try to stop

him.” Whatever else he might be, Kanou Shinichi could be very stubborn; once he got an idea into his head, there was scant dissuading him. If experience was anything to go by, I could guess that trying to stop him by force now would only make things harder. As for me, I wasn’t unhappy to have this particular conversation put off for a while.

“I suppose Koganuma-kun went with him?”

“You can bet on it,” Captain Satou said, fiddling with some sort of machine. A communicator of some kind, I assumed. They were still close enough that we might be able to ascertain her location. Without satellites or any kind of relay stations, though, long-distance communication was impossible in this world.

“I suppose I ought to go pay my respects to Her Majesty. He did ask me to deliver a message, after all. Perhaps you could take me to the castle.”

“Yes, sir.” Captain Satou nodded, and we boarded the LAV once again.



I sat on the driver’s bench of the bird-drawn carriage, Myusel holding the reins. On my trip to school each day, I had a carriage and driver hired out by the Eldant Empire—but today we’d forcibly relieved that driver of his duties, practically hijacking his carriage. We could hardly have told him to head for the border with Bahairam at full speed.

Myusel had learned the basics of carriage driving during her time in the military, so for the time being, we were doing fine. There would probably come a point when we had to rest the giant birds pulling the carriage, or when Myusel herself would need a break, but at this rate, it wouldn’t take us too long to get to the place where the puppet drake was kept.

Incidentally, Myusel wasn’t wearing her usual maid uniform right now, but instead a magical outfit Petralka had given her long before. Apparently it had magical spells in the stitching or something, and helped amplify the wearer’s magical abilities. The sort of thing you might have called wizard-specific wear in a game. Being a gift from Her Majesty the Empress, Myusel normally kept it carefully stored away. The fact that she’d gotten it out and put it on showed just how seriously she was taking this situation. Or maybe just how worried she was.

“Um, Shinichi-sama...” Myusel said, keeping her eyes forward but noticeably concerned.

“Yeah?”

“I’m, uh... I’m really sorry.”

“About what?”

“I mean, you’re doing all this for *my* mother...” She bit her lip and glanced down.

“Hey, hey, hey, eyes front! Watch where you’re going!”

“R-Right! Sorry!” She quickly looked up again. But she still looked worried—or maybe I should say apologetic.

After hearing what Amatena had to say, I had decided to go to Bahairam. Myusel obviously thought it was because of her mother. Notwithstanding Clara’s antics, it was Falmelle-san I’d talked about, and even if Amatena didn’t have any role in the danger Falmelle-san was in, Myusel’s mother was essentially a hostage in Bahairam. I could hardly just abandon her on the grounds that it sounded a little dangerous.

So yes, that was part of it. But still...

“I dunno, we’re not doing it *just* to rescue Falmelle-san,” I said, trying to smile. “It’s a favor to Amatena and Clara.”

“You mean...” There was a long pause during which Myusel blinked several times, then looked at me. “Shinichi-sama, you and Clara are really—”

“Look forward!” I cried. When Myusel was safely looking ahead again, though, I let out a sigh. “What makes you say that?”

“That ‘*fait accompli*,’ whatever that means...”

“Forget it. There’s nothing between us. Never was. Heck, the whole dream I was having before I woke up wasn’t about Clara, it was about y—”

“Yes? About what?”

“Eyes front!”

“Oh, r-right!” She quickly looked forward again. You know, she always was a bit of a klutz, but as cute as that could be, if that part of her personality were to take over while she was driving a carriage, it wouldn’t be funny. Maybe it was time to have Amatena or Clara take over driving duties.

“Anyway, there’s nothing between me and Clara, and there never has been. Clara can’t seem to forget that Amatena ordered her to work her way into my affections once. I think she’s just teasing me, really.”

“I see...” Myusel said, but she still sounded anxious. Well, I guess it was hard to blame her. When you go to wake a guy up in the morning and he’s in bed with a naked woman, he’d be pretty lucky if surprised or suspicious was all you were. Imagine how much worse it would have been if *I’d* been naked, too.

“So, uh, listen...” I started, scratching my cheek. “I know this is partly my fault for not being clear enough.” I understood perfectly well that this wasn’t the time for this conversation, but part of me felt

like maybe, with this being an emergency, I'd finally be able to say it.

"Shinichi-sama?"

"I keep telling you, look ahead. *Please*. Seriously, don't look at me."

Because this is already embarrassing enough...

"Y-Yes, sir."

"The fact is, I adore you and Petralka and Elvia... And because I like you all so much, I can't settle on any one of you. I don't have it in me to be fooling around with either of the others on the side."

Heck, if I had that sort of go-getterism, I'd probably have already gotten with at least Myusel or Elvia. It wasn't like I hadn't had the chance.

"If I'd only gotten to know one of you, or if only one of you had said you liked me, I could have answered without a second thought... I think," I said. Look, I knew I sounded pretty smarmy, or at least like a former-home-security-guard nasty otaku, and that maybe the real problem was I was spoiled for choice. But right at that moment, this was how I truly felt. Yes, the Forbidden Armor had made me spew it all out right in front of Myusel and everybody, but I figured it would be different if she could hear it from me without any magical intervention.

The interlude with the armor had also ended in me being a punching bag for Elvia, Myusel, and Petralka. But she didn't hit me this time.

"Of course, Shinichi-sama," she said, and even with her still looking forward, I could see the gentle smile on her face.

"I'm sorry to interrupt when you're so deep in conversation."

"Eeyipes!"

The budding feeling between me and Myusel was shattered as Amatena stuck her head out the passenger window. For the record, the passenger compartment contained her, Clara, Minori-san, Hikaru-san, and Elvia. Brooke was kind enough to offer to come along as a bodyguard, but I didn't feel right taking the newly minted father away from his kids, so I asked him to look after the house while we were gone instead. So the seven of us were going to Bahairam.

"We're almost there," Amatena said now, pointing to a small grove a ways up ahead. She touched a bracelet she was wearing. From the patterns carved into it, which were a little bit like the ones on our interpreter rings, I assumed it was some kind of magical item.

When she touched the bracelet, one corner of the forest shook violently. Myusel pulled on the reins in surprise, causing the two birds pulling the carriage to slow down, bringing the carriage gradually to rest not far from the trees.

Sticking up above the woods was a gigantic head with a spike

protruding from it that looked a bit like the feather decoration on a captain's unit, if you know what I mean. Pushing some trees aside with its gigantic wings and forelegs, squeezing past others, the bizarre thing worked its way out onto the roadway. It was, of course, a puppet drake. The one that had brought Amatenana and Clara here.

"Whoa..." I said, sort of without meaning to.

This obviously wasn't the first time I'd seen one of these creatures, but it was the first time I'd seen someone actually controlling one. Amatenana's bracelet must have magically communicated with the spike somehow.

"Everyone climb on board. This drake will carry us to the Third Capital," Amatenana said, and the note of panic in her voice was unmistakable.



Every morning, Kanou Shinichi comes to see us. The reason: to report to us on the activities and current status of Amutech before he goes to school. The organization we call Amutech was created by Japan, but the house in which Shinichi and his companions live, along with various accoutrements of their daily lives, are provided by us—or more specifically, our Holy Eldant Empire. In a word, the Holy Eldant Empire is Shinichi's employer.

So perhaps this morning routine represented, for Shinichi, a way of gauging his employer's mood. So much, we understood perfectly well. And yet...

If this were merely an ordinary report, there would be no need for Shinichi to come to us himself. Surely he could have sent a representative, or submitted written memoranda. Indeed, Zahar had suggested pointedly at times that such a system would be far easier to keep track of for posterity. And yet Shinichi persisted in taking time out of his busy schedule each morning to meet with us. Could it be because he wished to see our face? Part of us thought so. Or perhaps, wished it were so. We understood that there was a little girl within us, within Petralka an Eldant III, who felt it *should* be so.

For the Empress of the Holy Eldant Empire, one who stands atop an entire nation, it was a rather sorry thing to admit.

But such, perhaps, is what puts the *weak* in the weak-kneed feeling of love. That we should have been attracted to such a milquetoast is a mystery to ourselves, but perhaps there is no logic to feelings like these. Garius said as much. But whatever the case, we looked forward to our time in the audience chamber each morning. And so...

"Allow me to extend my fondest hopes that Your Majesty remains

in good health and high spirits.”

The moment we saw it was not Shinichi who appeared in the chamber, we were greatly disappointed. Perhaps our displeasure was evident on our face, for the man who had appeared in place of Shinichi—Matoba—wiped a cloth across his forehead, although he was not sweating. He forced an ambiguous smile onto his face.

“Ah..... It would seem that in high spirits, at least, you are not.”

“Most perceptive.” We narrowed our eyes at the bureaucrat from Ja-pan and asked, “Where is Shinichi?”

Behind Matoba waited a man from the Jay Ess Dee Eff, the Ja-panese army (though Minori always insisted, with a sort of smile, that it was no army). That was all, though—our evangelist of otaku culture was nowhere to be seen. Neither were his bodyguard Minori nor his fellow instructor Hikaru. In other words, not one of the Ja-panese people who taught at the school was present today. Surely they hadn’t forgotten to put in an appearance here before they went.

“Yes, about that...” Matoba produced a folded piece of paper. “He and I crossed paths just as I was arriving at the mansion.”

“Crossed paths?”

“This was stuck to the door of the house.”

We inspected the paper. “...*Am at...* where? *Please don't...* what? *Going to...* What is this?”

The paper, of course, was written in Ja-panese. Thanks to Shinichi’s instruction, we knew how to read a certain amount of the language, but the more complex characters called *kanji* continued to elude us. We knew only that they looked vaguely Ja-panese.

“In a word, something urgent has come up, so he’s going to take off of school for a while and leave the house.”

“Something urgent?”

Something so important that he would abandon his cherished school and forgo an audience with the imperial person? We frowned at the paper, trying to make sense of it, but then Matoba said, in a voice that suggested he didn’t quite believe it himself, “It would seem that the president of Faugron & Associates has become involved in some sort of incident that threatens her life...”

“Faugron & Associates?” That was the name of the organization owned by the mother of Myusel Fourant, the maid who served at Shinichi’s mansion. We instructed Matoba to read the page in full, whereupon we discovered that Falmelle Faugron was in danger, and had called for Shinichi and Myusel.

“Hrm?” But that would mean that Falmelle Faugron, though in danger, had been conscious and capable of calling for Shinichi and her daughter. Unless perhaps she had simply spoken their names in a daze. To Falmelle Faugron, Shinichi was nothing more than her

daughter's employer. Why should she wish to see him at a moment of crisis?

"No..." we said, filled with foreboding. In our mind was an image of Falmelle Faugron clasping Shinichi's hand when he raced up and saying, "Please, take care of my daughter..." She had, after all, single-handedly built the Faugron empire despite the hurdles being a woman presented. Would it be beyond her to put on a little bluff in order to secure her daughter's future? To pretend, for example, that she was in dire straits in order to bring Shinichi and Myusel to her, then to treat the relationship between them as a *fait accompli*, cornering Shinichi and securing him for her daughter for real?

"Hrrrm..."

How alarming that would be. Most alarming indeed. We would not expect Myusel to take unfair advantage, but if her mother were to throw a stick into the works by forcing her hand, then we ourselves could not afford to wait. At the very least, we should send an agent of our own to confirm what was going on with Falmelle Faugron...

"Your Majesty, what is the matter?" Garius asked from beside us.

"Falmelle Faugron... Do you believe she would push her own daughter out ahead of us?"

"Majesty..." Garius said, his normally impassive face clouded by something like exasperation. "You have been reading too many—what do they call them? Romantic comedies."

"No more than you have been reading of your *bee-ell*."

"Suppose we set aside our personal concerns during royal business," Garius said tranquilly. "You're overthinking things, Your Majesty."

"We certainly hope so..." We struggled to compose ourselves, then looked at Matoba—who continued to wipe at nonexistent sweat—and sighed.



This was hardly the first time I'd flown through the sky. When my family would go on vacations, we went by airplane, and here in this world, I'd ridden on the back of a "Faldra," a mechanical creature designed to look like a dragon. But somehow, being on the back of the puppet drake wasn't just different from being on an airplane (that should be obvious), but even from the Faldra. The wind whipped in my face the same way, but when you're on the back of a living creature, you can feel its breathing, its pulse, its unique rhythms. I guess it's a bit like the difference between riding a motorcycle and riding a horse.

Oh, and one other thing: the back of the puppet drake didn't have

any seats.

There were no chairs, nothing you could sit in and stretch out your legs. Instead there were some saddle-like things you could just balance in. But there weren't enough of them for all of us. Specifically, there were enough for four people, which meant we were three short. Sitting directly on the puppet drake's back, you could feel the muscles shift every time it flapped its wings. It didn't feel very stable, and it wasn't exactly a relaxing journey.

"Hrmm..." I said, watching the wings gently rise and fall to either side of me. The movements of the dragon's muscles ran like waves under my legs.

Sitting in the saddles were Amatena, who was controlling the drake, me, Hikaru-san, and Myusel. Minori-san, Clara, and Elvia clung to the puppet drake's back, secured only by ropes attached to metal fasteners on the saddles. The puppet drake had a nice, broad back, and was a pretty stable flier, so I guess maybe it didn't look that dangerous. But when you thought about it, one slip of the hand could leave you dangling from nothing but a single rope. We were flying comparatively low, in hopes of avoiding being spotted by guards on either side of the Eldant/Bahairam border, but we were still several dozen meters up. Not a height you wanted to fall from.

"I just don't quite feel sure about this," I said.

"Relax," Amatena said, glancing back over her shoulder at me. "I personally guarantee your safety."

"That's not really what I meant," I said with a wry smile.

Amatena was talking about the situation after we arrived in Bahairam. As someone from the Eldant Empire, any Bahairamanian who found me and didn't know much about who I was might very well arrest me. But I knew Amatena and Clara would do their utmost to keep me safe.

"I'll protect you, I swear it," Amatena said. Something in her tone wasn't quite usual, and I blinked a few times. Then Myusel added from beside me, "Sh-Shinichi-sama, I'll keep you safe m-m-myself!" She sounded unusually determined.

"Yeah, 's right, and I'm here too!" Elvia said from my other side. She sat up to talk to me, but the rushing wind quickly threatened to carry her away and she lay back down.

"Are you forgetting that protecting Shinichi-kun is technically my job?" Minori-san said with a grin. "Looks like I've got enough help that I don't need to worry about it anymore. Boy, Shinichi-kun, everyone sure loves you."

"Uh, I don't think this is about love, okay?"

"The only thing worse than a womanizer is a womanizer who doesn't know he's a womanizer," Hikaru-san said. Man, now even he

was piling on me.

"I'm telling you, that's not what this is! I'm just talking about how scary it is to be on the back of a puppet drake with no protection and nothing around you! This isn't the time for petty arguments, anyway! We have to rescue Myusel's mom, and everyone in the Third Capital in Bahairam..."

People's lives were at stake—we had to shelve our love triangles or love squares or whatever they were! That's what I was trying to say.

"I'm sorry," Myusel said, subdued. "You're doing this for... for my mother."

"Okay, speaking of conversations we've already had, I told you, I'm doing this because I want to. So you don't have to worry so much about it!"

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel looked at me, her big, purple eyes brimming. She blinked away tears that shimmered like gemstones.

Man, Myusel is wicked cute when she's like this! And those sweet tears... It's enough to make a guy just think about wanting to tease a girl a little bit, just tweak her a tad...

Oh, uh, but, not like *that*, okay? I honestly, earnestly just meant Myusel is cute and—

"That's right, that's just the kind of person Shinichi-sama is!" Elvia said, poking her head up between me and Myusel. "It's just like how he rescued me when I got captured!"

Gosh, now that I thought about it, that was actually quite a while ago.

"Oh, I'm sure Shinichi-san had more than goodness of heart in mind when he helped you, Elvia," Hikaru-san broke in with his usual disconcerting accuracy. Uh, that was true, as far as it went. Despite it all, he was an otaku, too, and he probably knew just what had been in my head.

"Which isn't necessarily to say that it's pure goodness of heart *this* time," Minori-san added casually. "I think he wants to show Myusel's mom his very best side, don't you? You know, for the future."

"Ya mean..." Elvia blinked. "The one Shinichi-sama's actually moe for is... Myusel's mom?!"

"Where did you get *that* from?!" I exclaimed, but Elvia was clenching her fist as if to say, *An ambush? Here?!*

"But then, Myusel's mom looks just like Myusel and looks super-duper young, too! That's what you're into, isn't it, Shinichi-sama?!"

"Look, I grant that they look a lot alike, but then why the heck would I be moe for Falmelle-san and not Myusel?!"

"Your manga are full of leading ladies who look young but are secretly older! Is that your Achilles' heel, Shinichi-sama? Is it loli-

granny moe?!”

“No, that—wait, isn’t that sort of rude to Falmelle-san?!” Falmelle-san wasn’t a loli, but she was hardly a “granny,” either. Hmm, but then, if Myusel and I had a kid, Falmelle-san would be a grandmother by definition... Nope, not the time for that train of thought!

“Shinichi-sama...” Myusel said, looking more and more pathetic.

“Older sister-type characters are one thing, but I really don’t think there’s ever a route that lets you get with the heroine’s mom! Please don’t look so traumatized!”

“Hmm, isn’t Falmelle-san single these days?”

“Just because you *can* stir the pot doesn’t mean you *have* to, Minori-san!”

I couldn’t believe this. I knew they had time to kill until we reached the Third Capital, but why did they have to spend it talking about *this*?

Minori-san grinned and apologized, but then she went on: “Hey, nothing wrong with making yourself look good in the eyes of the mother of a potential spouse. Once you meet the parents, the wedding is just around the corner, right?”

Elvia’s tail shot straight up and she leaned even closer to me. It looked like she had finally connected the dots. She looked more than ever like she was going to be blown off the back of the puppet drake; Hikaru-san reached up and hauled her back down a bit with a “Hey, watch out.”

“Grgh... U-Um, o-okay, so, so, so as long as we’re in Bahairam, I think you should take the chance to come meet *my* mom! And my dad, too.”

For some reason, Amatena was nodding. “He’s already met Jijilea.”

“Excuse me, but we all understand I’m going to the Third Capital specifically *and only* to stop some catastrophe, right?!”

At this rate, we were going to skip the capital entirely and go straight to Elvia’s house. It was a frightening thought. I felt uncomfortably like the moat around me was being filled in, or like my escape route was being cut off. Yes, I did wonder what kind of people Elvia’s parents were—purely out of curiosity—but meeting the parents of a girl who’s admitted she likes you—being introduced to them!—is a pretty nerve-racking event. And if it looks like their daughter is part of a three- or even four-sided love polygon, well, depending on Dad’s personality, I might find myself dead right then and there. If my little sister Shizuki ever brought home some guy who was like, “Yeah, man, I’m, like, so totally in love with Shizuki, it’s wild, man”—I think my dad would flip over a table. In fact, he might tear up the whole floor.

“We should be able to see the Third Capital soon,” Clara said, as

calmly as if none of the preceding conversation had bothered her at all. Feeling more than a little relieved, I looked in the direction she was pointing.

“Huh?”

I could see some kind of dark spot floating in the air. Was it just my imagination? Or ocular floaters or something? But the black dot didn’t move from side to side, and it seemed to keep getting bigger. And then I saw more of them...

“Are those...?”

“This is bad,” Amatena said.

Then Minori-san, who had produced a small pair of binoculars from somewhere: “Dragons?!”

“Huh? Puppet drakes?”

“No,” Amatena replied with a shake of her head. “They don’t have spikes.” She didn’t have binoculars, but she seemed to have a perfectly firm grasp of what was going on. She must have some vision.

I caught my breath. That would mean the creatures on a course to intercept us were not being controlled by the Bahairamanian army—they were just wild dragons. In the Eldant Empire, it had taken two or three full squadrons of heavily armed knights to subdue just one of those creatures. They were the strongest things around, for real. And now I saw one... two... three... five?!

“This is *bad!*” I yelled.

“I believe we’ve established that!” Amatena replied, and at the same time she did something that made the puppet drake go into a steep dive. Myusel and I hurried to secure ourselves in our seats, while Hikaru-san hung on tight to Elvia, who looked like she might fall off again. Minori-san, trusting the rope to hold her fast, dug through her stuff until she came up with her Type-89 pistol.

“I guess a pea shooter like this isn’t going to do much against them,” she said with an unmistakable hint of resignation.

It was true; the Type-89 used basic antipersonnel ammunition. The fast-moving but small-caliber bullets weren’t likely to bother a wild animal. This was a world away from the magnum rifle you would normally use if you were hoping to hunt bear or moose. And given that dragons were a lot bigger than either of those, and covered in scales, they seemed likely to deflect bullets pretty well. Add to that the fact that reptiles didn’t feel pain as acutely as other animals, and these creatures weren’t going to be scared off by a little pinprick.

So, to reiterate once again: this was very, very bad.

It wasn’t just a question of firepower. We hardly had ground to fight on. Comparatively stable though the puppet drake was, if you tried to fire a gun from its back, your accuracy would probably go through the floor. You could say goodbye to any hope of aiming for

the enemy's eyes or mouth or other sensitive but small areas.

So what should we do? What should we do?!

While I dithered, the wild dragons were approaching us at a tremendous speed. And then, at an equally tremendous speed, there was suddenly fire everywhere.

Dragon breath—the monster had breathed fire at us as it passed by.

“Eeyow hothothot!”

Amatena took evasive maneuvers so the attack didn't hit us directly, but small fires broke out here and there, like among the luggage and on various ropes.

“Fires! We have to put out the fires, right now!” I exclaimed. Myusel, Hikaru-san, and I hurriedly grabbed pieces of fabric or whatever was nearby and started beating at the flames, but for some reason they just wouldn't go out. Maybe dragon spit was especially flammable or something, so it could stick to things and keep on burning. I seem to recall that flamethrower fuel worked that way. And then there was...

“The heat!” The belt securing Myusel to her saddle was on fire, too. She beat desperately at it, trying to put it out—but then there was a *snap* and it broke.

“Myusel!” I saw her whole body lean to one side, and then she disappeared from view. It was pure, simple good luck that when I reached out, completely on intuition, my hand found hers. The only thought in my head was to grab hold. I groaned as Myusel's entire body weight suddenly strained against my wrist, elbow, and shoulder. “Hrrgh... Myusel...!”

I was finally able to look at her, and discovered I was the only thing holding her up. Below her, the scenery rushed by at an incredible speed. I reckoned we were about thirty meters up. Plenty fatal. But heck, at this speed, we could be at a tenth of that altitude and you would still break every bone in your body falling off the puppet drake.

Shit, shit, SHIT!

“Sh—Shinichi-sama!”

“H-Hang on! I'm going to pull you up!”

I tried to force all my strength into dragging her up the side of the drake, but I just couldn't get any power into my shoulder and elbow. Maybe they'd taken too much of a shock grabbing hold of her. No matter how I struggled to lift her, Myusel just dangled there.

I looked around, hoping for help, but Minori-san was holding fast to Clara to keep her from falling, and Hikaru-san was doing likewise for Elvia. Plus they were trying to put out the fires at the same time. Suffice to say they had their hands full. And with the puppet drake

still corkscrewing and turning to dodge the dragons, they had to really concentrate or the girls could fall off at any moment.

No good. If I was going to save Myusel, I was going to have to do it myself. I began to pull, not caring if my arm popped clean off.

But that was when we got hit with the second round of dragon breath.

“What theeeyowch!”

The saddle I was sitting on had caught fire this time. I reflexively jumped, at which point the belt securing me to the saddle—or really, the metal fasteners securing the belt to the saddle—gave way. I had probably helped—they must have started to deform with me pulling so hard.

And that, of course, meant—

“Wah!”

I was suddenly tumbling through the air, still holding Myusel’s hand.



No! Bad! Badbadbadbadbad!

This was looking like the end of my life, whether I was resigned to it or not!

Directly below us, the wilderness had abruptly given way to what looked like the streets of the Third Capital, but I didn't see anything that looked very inviting to land on. No tree branches to catch us, no lakes or ponds to break our fall. Just very hard-looking rooftops, bricks everywhere, and packed-earth streets. Every surface we could potentially land on said: insta-kill.

Wait, so was I—was I going to die a virgin?!

Arrgh! If I'd known this was going to happen—if I'd only known, I would have—uh, well... I would have played that one game, and read that manga I kept putting off—er, and I would also have asked Myusel to—aaahhhhh!

My brain was going a million miles a minute but not getting anywhere, and my sense of time seemed outrageously expanded. Myusel and I fell and fell, our hands clasped, the wind whipping in our ears. And somewhere in the middle of it all...

"Tifu murotsu!" I heard Myusel cry, and the storm of wind around us immediately calmed down.

No, not really. What had happened was, we'd stopped falling so fast.

I gaped.

"Tifu murotsu!" Myusel used the most basic of attack magic again.

There was almost no lag at all between when she completed the incantation and when the magic activated. Normally there's a beat between the two, but just now the spell took effect almost as soon as she was done speaking. Maybe that was thanks to the magical outfit she was wearing. Plus—and it's hard to gauge these things just by sight, but still—it looked like the amount and force of the wind she generated was much greater than usual.

I get it!

I finally realized what she was doing. Using the same spell several times in succession cuts way down on how long you have to spend on the incantation. By pointing Tifu Murotsu straight down and using it at the maximum strength possible, she was able to slow our descent considerably. We were in freefall, so the equal and opposite reaction to the downward gust of wind was to push back up on us.

But she wouldn't be able to slow us down enough, not on her own.

Okay, what was it? The incantation, how did it go? It was... Uh... Come on! Spell, spell, spell!

"Ahhhhh!" Even as I screamed, I managed to yelp out the chant.

“Tifu murotsu!”

“Tifu murotsu!”

The two of us desperately fired our spells off, but we kept falling. There were the rooftops, getting closer and closer.

“Myusel!”

“Yes, sir!”

We were communicating almost telepathically. It was obvious she knew exactly what I had in mind.

We each readied a Tifu Murotsu as strong as we could possibly make it, took aim at the fast-approaching rooftop—and then let loose at exactly the same spot, at exactly the same time. Two spells, one of them amplified by magical clothing, started up a tremendous tornado of wind right on the roof. It spread out like a bomb blast in every direction. Including up, toward us.

There was the force of a physical blow, and the speed of our descent dropped again. Myusel and I hit the rooftop, clinging to each other. The landing knocked the air out of our lungs, and we rolled several times across the roof.

Just as we were in danger of tumbling over the edge, we stopped.

“Cough... Hack... Hrrgh... That hurt...” I finally managed.

I guess I should have been grateful that hurt was all it did. I don’t know how far up we fell from, but dropping off a dragon in midair and winding up with nothing more than a few bruises was pretty darn good luck.

“Myusel, are you okay?”

“Yes... You, Shinichi-sama?”

“Yeah, thankfully.”

Only then did we let go of each other and sit up. Even we couldn’t bring ourselves to be embarrassed at a moment like this.

I took a long look upwards. What had happened to the others? The question burned in my mind, but the only thing I could say for certain was that I no longer saw the puppet drake overhead, or the silhouette of the dragon that had attacked us. I took a look around, and far in the distance, practically on the other side of the city, I could see a dark spot heading for the ground, trailing smoke. That, I guessed, was our puppet drake.

“Yikes...”

That looked like a crash landing in the making. For the time being, though, they were still airborne. If everyone could just hang on to the drake, there was every chance they would make it to the ground in one piece. I didn’t see the other dragon, either. Maybe they only hunted other flying things.

So, uh... good for a start, I guess?

But all wasn’t quite well.

“This place...” I said. The first word I would have come up with for it was *hot*. “Eeyikes,” I said as I looked out from the edge of the roof.

I had been too busy to notice while we were falling, but now I saw that just like Amatenah had said, pillars of flame—there was no other word for them—were bursting out of the ground all over the city. Even at a quick glance, I could spot several decimated buildings. They appeared to have been destroyed when gouts of fire spewed up from directly beneath them.

The pillars of flame burned incessantly, the way you might expect from a gas fire or something. Given how blackened the earth and buildings around them were, they must have been awfully hot. What on earth could be fueling them? They didn’t produce any smoke to speak of, which made it seem like maybe underground natural gas deposits were behind this. But whatever the case...

“This place is practically leveled already,” I whispered desolately. I hardly saw any people. Had they all escaped? Or had they died...? That didn’t even account for the many people who, Amatenah had said, were trapped by rubble or the flames.

I hope Falmelle-san is okay...

“First things first. Let’s head for this Dragon’s Den.” I looked toward a small hill rising in the center of the Third Capital. If what Amatenah had told us was true, that would be the location of the Dragon’s Den.

“Yes, sir,” Myusel nodded—and then she squeezed my hand.

“Er—?”

I was surprised by this unusually forward gesture from her, but she looked at me with an expression of resolve that seemed as tragic as it did heroic. “I swear I’ll protect you.”

“Uh... I think that’s usually the guy’s line. But, uh...” To be fair, I hardly knew who had saved who when we were falling.

This seemed right for me and Myusel. Neither one of us specifically saving the other, but sort of—supporting each other. Okay, so my manly pride made me want to burst out, “No matter what happens, I *will* keep you safe!” or something like that. But that would’ve been—unrealistic, let’s say? Inappropriate, at the very least.

Anyway...

“Let’s at least see how far we can get.”

How close we could make it to the center of the Third Capital—to the Dragon’s Den? That seemed like the best choice we had at the moment, anyway. It wasn’t like we could just waltz back to Eldant at this rate.

“Yes, sir.” I felt Myusel’s hand tighten around mine again as we turned and headed into the wilderness that was the city now.



The smell of burning assaulted my nose. Was it the half-cooked puppet drake beside us, or the whole Third Capital? I couldn't tell. Pillars of flame sprouted all over the city, scorching the area even now. Near those pillars, everything was vulnerable. Trees, anything made of paper—any of it could be caught up in a stray spark and set alight.

“So hot...” I took out a handkerchief and wiped my glasses, which were smeared with sweat. Even hidden in the shadow of some debris, the heat enveloped us and made us uncomfortably hot. The Kingdom of Bahairam already had a warmer average temperature than the Eldant Empire, but at that moment it must have been more than 40° C in the Third Capital.

“Huh. I think this puppet drake's flying days are over,” Hikaru-kun said with a sigh. In front of him, our drake was keeled over. It wasn't dead, but there was a huge gash at the base of its right wing, right across the muscles it would need to fly. It had managed to help us glide in, but that was the absolute most it could have done. No more racing through the sky for us.

I remembered hearing at one point that dragons weren't like birds; they didn't necessarily have to flap their wings in order to fly. But whether by magic, or sprite power, or whatever, the wings were nonetheless the “core” or “axis” around which flying took place.

“Guess we can just be grateful it glided down to the ground for us,” I said with a sigh. With that dragon attack, we had just avoided a very fatal crash landing. According to Amatenā, dragons had the senses of the reptiles they resembled. In other words, they weren't as sensitive to pain as mammals were, and our puppet drake continued on under Amatenā's control despite being grazed by dragon fire a couple of times.

On top of that, it looked like the wild dragons had just attacked the puppet drake because it had wandered too close to them. Maybe our attackers didn't realize we were clinging to its back; in any event, when the puppet drake started going down, trailing smoke, the attackers didn't pursue. We could count ourselves lucky for that.

But it wasn't all sunshine and good news.

“Hrm,” I said, taking off my overshirt and rolling up my sleeves as I went to inspect the cargo. I had packed two aluminum-alloy trunks full of weapons and gear, but one of them had tumbled off somewhere during our glide in, while the other must have been scorched by dragon fire, because the edges of the case were badly deformed.

We managed to get the case open, and discovered that the Type-89 ammunition and spare bandoliers, along with the C4

explosive and flashbang grenades, were all safe. However, I'd brought a radio device and several other electronics of various descriptions, the resin casings of which were all now melted beyond usability. I figured we could just be grateful the ammunition hadn't detonated in the face of such intense heat.

"Guess the question is what we do now," Hikaru-kun said. Out of the people standing here, I would have put him lowest on the list when it came to survivability in combat or extreme situations, but he seemed remarkably composed. Maybe it was just his personality. Not to mention that despite the long Gothic-Loli dress he was wearing even now, he didn't appear to have sweated a drop. Elvia, standing beside him, looked more concerned than he did.

"Shinichi-sama—!"

"I think I noticed him and Myusel using Tifu Murotsu to slow their fall. At the very least, I suspect they survived the drop."

"Huh? Y—Ya really think so?!" Elvia said, snapping back to herself.

"I can't be sure, but there's a good chance."

They may have slowed their descent, but when you're in freefall like that, you don't exactly get to pick your landing spot. They could always have dropped right into one of those pillars of flame, or encountered any number of other potential perils. I wasn't in a position to guarantee anything.

"Shinichi-kun being who he is, though, if he is alive, I assume he's headed for the Dragon's Den."

"Good guess," Hikaru-kun said.

"That would make heading for the Den ourselves seem like the smart play," I said, and then looked over at Clara. She was tending to Amaten, who had stayed focused on controlling the puppet drake all the way through our landing, and had gotten burns on her left wrist and thigh for her trouble. "But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bothered by all this."

There was a beat. Was it Amaten's wounds that made her grimace, or was it what I had said?

"I know it's a big military secret, but what is the Dragon's Den?" I closed in on Amaten as I spoke. "It doesn't sound like it's literally a place where a dragon lives."

"What do you mean by that?" Hikaru-kun said, puzzled. I guess this hadn't occurred to him yet. "Wouldn't it be natural for dragons to defend a dragon's den?"

"Yes, it would," I said to him over my shoulder, with a bit of a smile. "But dragons forming a coordinated air squadron and attacking only a passing puppet drake? I think that's less natural."

Hikaru-kun's eyes widened as he put the pieces together. We both

looked at Amatena, but neither she nor Clara said anything.

“Now, of course,” I continued, “migrating birds form flocks, too. It’s always possible dragons do something like that. But then why would they decide not to pursue a fallen foe?”

Still nothing.

“You said it yourself, Amatena. You told us dragons are born fully formed. So there’s no need for them to protect their young, anyway.”

Protecting the nest was a behavior based primarily in the drive for species continuation. But a dragon nest wasn’t populated with defenseless pups. It was full of possibly the most dangerous creatures in this world, all of which were born completely functional. There was no need to protect the nest—in fact, there was hardly any need to build one. Which all implied one thing...

“I honestly don’t know the details,” Amatena finally said with a quick sigh. “Different command structures, remember. As I told you, it’s the Undertakers who oversee the Dragon’s Den, and they report directly to the Father-ruler. Completely different chain of command from mine. I—we—aren’t even told what they do in there.” She shook her head.

“Ugh, parallel command structures,” I groaned. “Is there anything less efficient?”

Different command structures meant minimal sharing of information, so that even those who worked side by side in the same organization sometimes hardly knew what the other was doing. It was ridiculous. Not that it didn’t happen in the JSDF or the Japanese bureaucracy, so I wasn’t one to judge.

“But we are both military,” Amatena said, “and when you serve long enough, you start to hear the rumors about the Dragon’s Den.”

“Rumors?”

“They say it’s not just dragons that go in there, but all kinds of strange and mysterious things. I don’t know what, exactly. Just that, since the Dragon’s Den got its research programs up and running, our country has seen gradual economic improvements, and that we’ve also been bringing in people from other countries with technical expertise. Which makes me think they—”

Then she stopped. She looked around as if she had noticed something; Clara and Elvia likewise were scanning the area, their ears and tails moving. Clara and Amatena looked as expressionless as ever; Elvia was clearly nervous.

“What’s going on?” Hikaru-kun asked—and Elvia moved to put him protectively behind her.

“Big Sis Ama...”

“So we’re surrounded.”

“...Oh we are, are we?” I frowned but released the safety on my

Type-89. I'd noticed the people moving into position around us at almost the same moment as Amatena and Clara, but I had foolishly assumed they were Bahairamanian civilians who had failed to escape. I didn't have the sense that they wanted to kill us or even fight. And if they were just private citizens, then as long as we had Amatena and Clara with us, surely there was no need to expect any trouble. Right?

"What's happening?" I asked the other women. Amatena and Clara looked as alert and on the defensive as Elvia did.

"I don't know who they are, but I doubt they're friendly," Amatena said. At that moment, a series of silhouettes appeared on the rubble of a nearby building. The light from the pillars of fire combined with the piles of debris cast crazy shadows all over the area, and the newcomers used this to their advantage, making it hard to see them clearly. I could only make out dark humanoid shapes. The one thing that seemed certain was that there was something strange about them.

Gradually, the net began to tighten. The silhouettes slid closer, but nobody called out or asked if we were all right. If they were just ordinary citizens, then you would have expected them to say something when they saw Amatena's uniform. Which probably made them...

"Enemies?" I said.

We didn't know who they were, where they came from, or what they represented, but it seemed like a safe assumption.



The city was just... devastated, as far as the eye could see. The pillars of flame that made the whole place so hot were everywhere. It was like a gigantic forest of fire trees, or a cemetery with burning pillars instead of grave markers... Then there was the roar of the superheated air, a continuous pressure you could feel everywhere. Rubble and debris from smashed buildings was scattered on the ground, scorched or melted, and most of the roads were blocked. Once in a while, new pillars of flame would erupt from beneath it all, making it all but impossible to get around the debris if you weren't being very careful.

The whole world had become full of death. Maybe this was what hell looked like.

Of course, there were no guarantees we were safe where we were, either. We could hardly run away—it was everything we could do just to keep ourselves safe from the heat of the flames. We elves are relatively capable magic users. We're especially gifted with wind magic, and at that moment just about everyone in the caravan, including myself, was using some form of it, creating a whirlwind to

ward off the scorching heat. So far, we had somehow managed to keep ourselves from being boiled alive.

I spoke to my subordinates. “Lindel-kun, trade places with Parselba-kun. And Ericks-kun, you trade with me.” Parselba and Ericks had already been using their magic continuously for close to half the day. If we didn’t relieve them soon, they would grow so tired that it wouldn’t be possible for them to recuperate their lost magical powers. We didn’t know how long these pillars of flame might be here for, so it was less crucial to push ourselves to the very limits than to stay consistent, trading places as necessary, in order to protect ourselves with the wind.

“Times like this, even I can appreciate those oafs’ magic,” I said with a sigh.

“Those oafs” were dwarves. Long-standing antagonists of elves, they might be as short as their own tempers and stink of dirt, but it was impossible to deny their awesome command of the magics of earth and metal. If they’d been trapped here, they could have dug themselves a foxhole or two and simply hidden from the trouble. If, that was, the flames didn’t go on so long that their hideout ended up doubling as a stewpot with them inside.

But in any event...

“Madam President, you already took a shift before Ericks. Please don’t overwork yourself,” Parselba said, coming up beside me to take over from Lindel. It was true; I had been handling his area before Ericks took over.

“It’s quite all right,” I said. “If I really can’t go on, I promise I’ll let you know.” Then I intoned a spell, keeping up the wall of wind Ericks had created.

Parselba Grain had uncharacteristically sharp features for an elf; now he watched me with a complicated mixture of emotions on his face. He had been a part of Faugron & Associates since my father’s time, meaning he was important to me. After my father died, it would have been perfectly possible for Parselba to take over the company, but instead he dutifully pulled strings and whispered in ears so that I, the daughter of the family, could inherit the business.

I owed him a great deal, including much of my education in the trade, but he refused to be anything more than Faugron’s head clerk. This meant I found myself giving him a great many orders, but it never seemed to bother him.

“You’re our leader,” he said now. “The one who must coordinate and command everyone here. If you collapse from strain, we will have lost our head. The hands and feet alone can do nothing. Magic drains away the spirit—you of all people should be taking a longer rest than most.”

“Very well...” I finally said, with another sigh. Age and experience had their place, and Parselba usually turned out to be right. I promised him I would try to find someone else to switch with as soon I could and go get some rest. Then, continuing to maintain the magic, I took another look around.

I could see one thing very clearly: we weren’t going to get anywhere like this. What we needed was some way to change the situation, by force if necessary.

Truth be told, we weren’t completely without an escape route. If we could find one road where the rubble wasn’t quite as bad, and one place on that road where the gap between the pillars of flame was a little wider, someplace you could sneak through without getting roasted, then there might be a way out of all this.

But escaping this spot wouldn’t mean getting out of the Third Capital. It would, rather, mean heading directly toward the center of the city: the military facility the soldiers here called the Dragon’s Den. Escaping into the Den might prove our salvation. Underground, we would be at least somewhat shielded from the heat. At the very least, it could give us a brief rest.

Unfortunately, the Bahairamanian soldiers, especially the so-called Undertakers who were directly responsible for the Dragon’s Den, weren’t even remotely willing to let foreigners into the building. I wasn’t sure if any of them were still inside, but if they were, they would certainly prevent us from entering. And if they had already left, I had to assume they would have closed any entrances and exits tightly to prevent outsiders from getting in. Neither was a helpful prospect.

“M-Madam President!” one of my subordinates called in a shaking voice. “Look!”

Surprised, I looked in the direction they indicated. I was even more taken aback to see a human figure where I was sure there hadn’t been one moments before. The backlight from the pillar of flame made it impossible to make out any features, but from the silhouette, the person appeared young, perhaps a child. Dwarves cut short figures as well, but they looked more filled out, rounder. This person had slim arms and legs; they looked almost delicate.

“Where have you come from?” my subordinate demanded as the figure came closer. “Is there a way through there? The rubble—”

“Who are all of *you*?” the figure demanded in return. I was surprised: it was a woman. The high pitch of her voice made her sound young, almost childish. She went on: “You lot aren’t with Bahairam, are you? You don’t smell like it. So who the hell are you? Answers, now! And careful, ’cause those answers are gonna help me decide what to do with ya.”

Is it just an affectation?

For a child, she seemed awfully forward with a bunch of adults. Downright rough, in fact. And she sounded like a street brawler. Yet there was something oddly antique about her diction, as well. Maybe she was, say... a former rich householder, since reduced to poverty?

“What in the name of—?!” one of my subordinates exclaimed. At first, I didn’t know what had startled him so badly—but then the figure came closer, and as I became able to discern her features, I finally understood.

She was clearly not human. Oh, she looked human enough. Legs and arms in all the right places, textbook human facial features, nothing amiss. But she was wearing some kind of undergarment that left much of her body exposed, including a large swath of her not-yet-developed chest. And there, around her collarbone, something glowed a pale bluish-white just under the skin.

It took the form of three diamonds, all in a row. You could almost mistake it for a tattoo, but it wasn’t. The light pulsed slowly, almost as if it were breathing. No, she wasn’t human, but just as clearly, she wasn’t an elf, dwarf, or beast person, either.

The lights in her chest didn’t look like natural parts of her body. They looked artificial, and the fact that the rest of her appeared so typical was downright chilling. Could she be some kind of... doll? I knew of prosthetic arms and legs; the ones the dwarves made were especially famous for their quality. Imbuing them with the right magic could make them virtually as usable as an original limb. But that didn’t seem to be quite what was going on here, either. Limbs that had been amputated or lost could in best-case scenario be replaced with artificial substitutes, but torsos? Heads? Not so much. Or was it only the relatively small space around the lights in her chest that was man-made?

In short: what in the world was she?

She’d asked us who *we* were, but without knowing anything about her, a thoughtless answer could potentially destroy us all. We didn’t know any more about this girl-like thing than we did about anything else that was going on around us right now. We were in no position to negotiate.

“You’re right, we aren’t Bahairamanian citizens. We’re merchants who just happened to be here on a trading mission. These people are my employees. And we’re in something of a tight spot, what with this disaster suddenly catching us all up.”

“Disaster...?” The girl-like thing cocked her head, puzzled. “Disaster. I see... Disaster. It does look that way. Well, you ain’t from Bahairam, I believe that much. But... hell’s bells. This is quite a thing.”

I exchanged mystified looks with Parselba. What was this girl-like

thing (that was the best thing I could think of to call her) talking about?

“Argh,” she finally said, giving an annoyed scratch of her head. Then she glared at us again. “Huh, well, can’t have a bunch of BOUs wandering around loose. Better clean ’em up.”

She stuck her hand in the air, almost like she was signaling to someone.

Or something: from behind an especially large mountain of rubble, dragon heads, no fewer than three of them, rose up on long necks.

Chapter Three: The Capital In Flames

There's something that's always bugged me in certain games. You know when you're fleeing a bunch of zombies through a ruined cityscape, and you see a space you think you might just be able to squeeze through? But somehow, the game never gives you the option to even try to worm your way past the rubble or climb the metal fence or whatever. I get that they're trying to make it more game-like by forcing you to solve puzzles or get through mazes, but the more realistic the graphics for the world and characters get, the more these "game constraints" grate.

It's like, if I've got a hand grenade, shouldn't I be able to blow through that wall? If the door is locked, why can't I just shoot it with my Magnum? That sort of thing. To be fair, more and more games are trying to offer exactly that—the ability to destroy anything on screen or otherwise interact in realistic ways with everything you encounter—but those are usually a slightly different genre, too.

But whatever. The point is, when you run into those sorts of situations in a video game, you just have to shrug and say, "Welp, sometimes games are that way." Then you give yourself a mental pat on the back for knowing that if you were really in that sort of situation, you would find much smarter and more efficient ways to deal with it.

Anyway.

"Eeyowowow!" I exclaimed, dancing away from the crumbling rubble.

"Shinichi-sama?" Myusel asked from behind me, concerned.

I came to a halt after a few steps and sighed. "This'll never work."

I was staring down a pile of debris as big as a sizable hill. It was smack in our path, no way around it. Now *that's* the sort of thing you'd see in a game. And clever me, I thought, *I'll just climb over it*. But of course, a pile of rubble is nothing like a proper building. It's just that: a pile. It isn't necessarily "put together" very well, and it doesn't always have convenient hand- and footholds for the enterprising main character.

And even if you can't tell just by looking, sometimes it isn't very stable, either.

All of which is to say that the moment I put a hand on the mountain of rubble, it started rumbling and collapsing, and a box-

sized piece of stone that had been balanced at the very top came tumbling straight at me. If I hadn't dodged it... well, it's not like I would have wound up flat as a pancake, I guess, but I wouldn't have gotten away unscathed, either.

I knew what I would have done if this were a fighting manga. I would have just picked a nice spot and smacked it with my fist, vaporizing the rubble and opening the road. But if a former home security guard like me tried something that silly, it was the bones of my hand that would have been vaporized.

Point is, this was not a good situation. It was way too dangerous to scramble over the pile of debris—even by myself, let alone with Myusel in tow.

“Looks like we can't go this way...” I said to Myusel, feeling oddly defeated. “And here I was hoping we could just make straight for the place.” I looked at the great, looming thing I assumed was the Dragon's Den—was that some sort of hill behind the building?

Going straight to any place in the Third Capital was obviously a dicey proposition now, what with buildings collapsed or collapsing and pillars of fire closing off other pathways. If anything, it was almost like a dungeon. Not exactly, of course; not with the sky still open above our heads. That was part of what made it so dangerous to try to climb over that rubble. And the buildings that still stood looked so badly abused that it seemed like a good kick might bring them crashing down.

“Shinichi-sama,” Myusel said anxiously, “I don't think we should try to force our way through here. We should look for somewhere easier...”

That seemed like the best idea. But I had to admit, I had sort of been hoping to put all that gaming experience to good use—the survival skills! The head for risk management!—and just maybe make a good impression on Myusel in the process. So much for that. And now that I thought about it, Myusel, with her military experience, was probably better equipped to deal with this situation than I was.

“Huh, oh well. Uh, let's see...” Myusel and I looked around until we spotted a pathway with a minimum of rubble on it. “This way looks passable.”

Of course, there was always the possibility of a building coming down on our heads as we went by, but in any event this was the only place where we could drive straight ahead. “Let's try it,” I said. “Carefully.”

“Right.”

I took a few steps forward—and then immediately stopped cold. I had the distinct feeling of someone's hand touching mine. Not hard enough to call it a push or a pull, but noticeable. Whose hand was it?

Well, in these circumstances, it could only have been one person.

“Er, uh, Myusel?”

“Oh, I—I’m sorry,” she said, pulling her hand back. “I, uh, that is, I thought holding hands would be the... the safest thing to do. I suppose...”

“U-Uh, yeah. Of course. Good idea,” I answered. She was red, and I could feel my own face flushing. We were just holding hands! It was a matter of safety! Yeah, that was it. This was definitely the plan. Or so I kept telling myself as I reached out to Myusel again.

“Well, I-let’s give it a shot...”

“Yes, sir.”

Part of me felt genuinely exasperated with myself, like, *How can you do a romantic-comedy routine in the middle of an apocalypse?* But hey, what else did I expect from me? I might not get out of this alive, and I wouldn’t want to have any regrets. It would just be uncool—downright pathetic, in fact—to be staring into the Great Beyond thinking, *If only I’d taken Myusel’s hand!*

Okay, so you could argue that what was really happening was that in moments of crisis, the ancient impulse to leave offspring asserts itself and heightens the sex drive. But it was hardly like I was going to jump her right then and there. So who could begrudge me a little hand-holding?

All that was going through my mind as Myusel and I worked our way, ever so cautiously, down the road between buildings.

That was when I exclaimed, “Hey!” There was somebody at the other end of the street. Sitting in front of a pile of rubble, no less, it looked like. At first I thought it must be a dead body, but then I was sure I saw it move.

“Shinichi-sama...”

“Yeah.”

Myusel and I worked our way toward the figure, going as fast as we could without starting any avalanches from the buildings to either side. When we got close enough, we crouched down to look, and discovered the figure was a middle-aged man. He seemed to be conscious; he raised his head unsteadily to look at us.

“Were you both too late, too? Too late to escape...?” he asked, his face a mask of terror. His slightly pointy ears and seemingly small stature led me to guess he was a dwarf. Most of my Bahairamanian acquaintances were beast people, so this was sort of novel.

Anyway, Myusel and I looked at each other. The man’s question implied that he was a Bahairamanian who hadn’t been able to escape this city in time to avoid this catastrophe. And he thought we were residents of the Third Capital like he was. That obviously wasn’t true, but at the same time, Eldant and Bahairam weren’t on the best of

terms. We couldn't exactly just admit, "Naw, we're from the Eldant Empire."

Before Myusel could accidentally say anything careless, I said the first thing that came into my head: "Uh, no, we were just outside the Third Capital." I didn't know that city's geography, and I hadn't witnessed the moment the catastrophe struck. It didn't seem likely that I was going to be able to pass for someone who lived here. "We're merchants who came here to trade with Bahairam," I added. "But we got separated from our caravan."

Since we knew from Myusel's mother's activities that merchants came and went in Bahairam all the time, this wouldn't sound suspicious. The Eldant make of Myusel's and my magic rings could potentially be a problem, but I thought my story would do for now.

"We wondered what in the world had happened to them and came in here to check things out."

"Ah, so you missed each other..." The man smiled, half amused and half pitying.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The military evacuated this city along with everyone who was able to go with them. I was late, because... well, a lot of reasons."

This was the man's story: he lived alone, and an injured leg meant he couldn't walk very quickly. The convoy of citizens fleeing the city had left him behind. As he shambled along, new pillars of flame had emerged, more buildings had collapsed, and eventually he had been trapped.

And then there were the dragons.

"After they showed up, a whole bunch of 'em, the army didn't come back."

"Did you say dragons?" I thought of the monster that had attacked us on the puppet drake. I guess we hadn't been their only targets. Apparently, they had gone after the Bahairamanian military and even its civilians. The way the man talked about it, though, it sounded like these monsters had come completely out of the blue, like he had never seen hide nor hair of them in all his time in the Third Capital. Which would mean...

"Um, I can give you some first aid, if you want," Myusel said, looking at the man's foot. He was wearing sandals and didn't appear to have any socks. She could look right at his foot. A nasty shard of rock was lodged in the man's ankle. It wasn't bleeding to speak of, but it looked immensely painful.

"Sure, good idea, Myusel. You mind?" I said to the man.

"It'd be a help, that..." The man looked troubled, but nonetheless, Myusel crouched down beside him.

She got a grip on the shard of rock. "This will hurt for a moment.

Bear with it, okay?" Then she braced the man's foot with her other hand and started to chant a spell. The incantation was surprisingly lengthy, nothing like the Tifu Murotsu spell I was so used to.

"*Teiru Guniiraa*," she intoned. A pale light began to shine where her hand was touching the man's ankle. "Here I go." And then she pulled the shard of rock from his foot.

The man braced himself against the inevitable pain, but it must not have hurt as badly as he expected, because he looked almost surprised. "My... Is that magic?" he murmured. Even with the rock removed, the wound wasn't bleeding. In fact, it was closing up, a membrane appearing over it.

"Yes, sir. It's the simplest of healing spells," Myusel said, sounding embarrassed. Come to think of it, she had told me that she'd learned just two spells during her time in the army. One was the familiar Tifu Murotsu. I guess the other was *Teiru Guniiraa*.

It would make sense: Tifu Murotsu could serve for both offense and defense, while *Teiru Guniiraa* would allow soldiers to heal wounded companions. Good things to know in the military, and the absolute minimum to enable each person to look out for themselves.

"I assume it doesn't hurt too much now," Myusel said. "But I have to warn you, this spell is intended to anesthetize pain and stanch bleeding, not heal injuries. The wound may look like it's closed, but it's only superficial. The spell can't knit bones or cure internal injuries. You'll still need to be very careful."

"Thank you. No, this is plenty. Say, young lady, you wouldn't happen to be an elf?"

"Sir—?"

"Nothing. I just never expected an airhead—erm! Pardon me. I mean an elf, to use healing magic on a dwarf like me." The man smiled sadly.

"Airhead." I'd heard that a few times before—it was a favorite insult when dwarves were describing elves. I didn't think elf brains were actually any lighter than anyone else's; instead, the taunt seemed to derive from an association with elves' proficiency with wind magic, or perhaps the way they looked so light moving through the air. Incidentally, when elves wanted to insult dwarves, they liked to call them "stubborn as stone" or simply "moles."

"It's true, sir. I'm a half-elf." Myusel looked at the ground.

My understanding was that the elves didn't recognize half-bloods as among their own. For better or for worse, they took great pride in their bloodlines. But unfortunately, such pride all too easily led to discrimination against and even persecution of half-elves. Myusel's identity wasn't an easy thing for her to admit—she had found it hard even to tell me at first.

“Ah, ah. I can see I oughtn’t to have asked. I apologize.” The dwarf man got slowly to his feet. Myusel’s magic had clearly done him some good, because a few exploratory steps showed he wasn’t in any particular pain now. “Incredible. At least I can walk now,” he said. But then he stopped. “Hold on. If you’re here, does that mean it’s possible to walk out of here?”

“Uh... *Possible* might be a strong word,” I said evasively. I could hardly explain we’d come here from Eldant on a puppet drake at the request of a Bahairamanian military officer, then been attacked by a wild dragon and used magic to save ourselves. It would take forever and it would probably lead to all sorts of trouble. “With things collapsing left and right, I can’t be sure the way we took to get here is still open.”

“That’s good enough. Rubble we can move with magic—with a Clay Doll, if we need to. Now that I don’t hurt anymore, I can use my magic,” the man grinned.

Dwarves were especially accomplished with magic involving metal and earth. I had even seen them produce three-meter-tall golems with nothing but some dirt. If anyone would be able to deal with a little rubble, it would be a dwarf. I wasn’t so sure about the pillars of fire, though.

“Doesn’t matter,” the dwarf said. “I just want to get as far away from *there* as possible.” He cast a baleful glance towards the hill—the hill at the center of the Third Capital. In the direction of what I assumed was the Dragon’s Den.

“Those dragons must’ve come from whatever it is the army’s got over there,” the dwarf went on. “Rumor is they breed dragons in that building. But it’s too secret or something, and they don’t let us civilians anywhere near it. Which makes a person think...” It almost sounded like he was complaining—about the military, and especially about the unit that oversaw the Dragon’s Den. Amatena had mentioned they were a special division, and that they wielded a lot of influence here in the Capital.

This man told us that it was a unit of the regular military that had evacuated the populace earlier, while the special group assigned to the Dragon’s Den had been nowhere to be seen even after the trouble started.

“Murdered by their own dragons, every one, I have no doubt,” the man spat.

“Hmmm...”

In other words, this man’s take was this: the special military unit was breeding dragons in the Dragon’s Den, but there was some sort of accident or mistake and the dragons got loose and went wild, leading to the way things were right now. I guess the assumption would be

that the pillars of fire were caused by dragons underground... or something. My impression was that this explanation didn't quite fit the facts. The idea of underground dragons felt especially weird. But anyway...

"The Dragon's Den is actually where we're heading," I said.

"Come again?"

"Our friends are supposed to be there."

When I said *friends*, I meant Myusel's mom, but if Minori-san and the others had survived, I assumed they would have headed for the Dragon's Den. So it worked both ways. Not that it mattered to the dwarf.

"Then your friends are dead!" he cried. "Escape with me, kids! I won't think any less of you! Just show me the way out of here!"

"No, we—" I looked at Myusel. She was biting her lip and staring at the ground as if she was trying very hard to fight something. Maybe she was thinking of her mother. I could hardly say, *You're right, sounds dangerous! Let's get out of here!* Instead I said, "I'm sorry. We just have to get to that building and try to help them."

"Ahh, cripes... But I understand." The man braced himself against a wall and hefted himself to his feet. The leg Myusel had treated he put gingerly on the ground, then when he was satisfied it could bear his weight, he worked his way stumblingly in the direction we had come. Then suddenly he stopped and looked back at us over his shoulder. "Thanks for the help. I apologize, but I can't be going with you."

"Uh, sure..." I stole a glance at Myusel, then nodded at the man. "Be careful. Lots of stuff around here that could fall down any time."

"Yeah, I'll be careful. And you do the same." And with that, the man shuffled off down the road and was gone.

"Uh, um, Shinichi-sama..."

Before Myusel could finish whatever she was about to say, I broke in: "C'mon, we'd better get going, too. To the Dragon's Den." I went on: "Look, there's no guarantees we could get out of the Third Capital now even if we tried, and besides, your mom said I would be able to do something about this. We have to go."

Myusel looked at me, her eyes full. *Yipes. S-So cute...* I'd seen her on the verge of tears before, but it didn't stop me from admiring anew how cute she was with those brimming eyes.

And so, burning with moe, I took Myusel's hand.

"Oh..." she said.

"Let's go. All right?" I said, and then I tugged on her hand, leading her away.



When we first saw the crowd of figures, we'd assumed they were citizens of the Third Capital, or maybe soldiers. It was an obvious assumption, right? When there's a major disaster, people try to evacuate or otherwise flee, but some of the populace might not make it out, or certain public servants might see fit to remain at their posts. Perfectly normal.

But we learned shortly that this was nothing so simple.

"Why are they all naked?!"

We discovered that not one of the figures was wearing a scrap of clothing. There were close to fifty of them by my count. Werewolves and weretigers, along with lizardmen, elves, and dwarves. And all of them young women. But the most disquieting thing was that none of them showed any sign of embarrassment, but only gazed blankly at us.

Then I realized: there were no humans here. I glanced around the crowd again, and I was right: everyone present was what they called demi-humans in Eldant. Allegedly, all peoples were considered equal under the father-ruler here in Bahairam—in other words, it was the exact opposite of the Kingdom of Zwelberich, whose prince had once proposed marriage to Petralka—so it wasn't that surprising to see a large number of demi-humans. But was this a coincidence? Or something more nefarious?

"The heck is this?" Hikaru-kun said with a frown. "They're all naked. Don't try to tell me they were *all* caught taking a bath right when the catastrophe hit."

"I assume they'd at least cover themselves, then. Or maybe Bahairamanians aren't worried about being seen without clothes?"

"Where in the world would you get that idea?" Amatena said with a touch of irritation. "I know our traditional clothing shows a good deal of skin, but no one in their right mind in Bahairam would go traipsing through the streets naked!" She did shoot a glance at Elvia, who routinely dressed in things that exposed her midriff.

Okay, fine. But then who were these people?

"There are elves and dwarves in this crowd, it looks like. So I don't think this has to do with 'that time'..." I said. Beast people, especially werewolves and weretigers, had a time each month when they essentially went into heat, a phenomenon that had previously led Elvia to attack Shinichi-kun. But I had never heard of elves, dwarves, or even lizardmen experiencing anything like that. Then again, we were all women here—except Hikaru-kun, and he looked like a woman—so maybe these demi-humans had no impulse to attack us, even if they were in heat. The chances of every single one of them being a lesbian seemed pretty small.

"Look at 'em," Elvia said uneasily. "Those eyes... They look so empty."

She was right: everyone we could see looked expressionless, their eyes dim. They didn't appear to be suppressing their expressions, the way Amatena and Clara sometimes did. It was like their emotions were simply missing. I'd seen Elvia in the grip of her "time" firsthand, and the insane glint in her eyes was as far from the look on these people's faces as you could get.

These completely naked people—okay, that's a mouthful; let's just call them "the nekkids"—surrounded us and gradually began to close in.

"Minori-san..." Hikaru-kun said nervously, but I had already noticed. "I know," I said. Specifically, I had noticed that things were not looking good for us. The nekkids didn't seem hostile, let alone like they wanted to kill us, but I was pretty sure they weren't coming up to shake our hands in friendship, either. It made me think of one of those zombie movies where the monsters were closing in. The nekkids weren't rotting on their feet, to be fair, but the situation seemed similar. In any event, it wasn't very comfortable. I'm not used to thinking about average people as my opponents in a fight. Frankly, it's easier when they come at you with obvious intent.

Nonetheless, I shifted my grip on my Type-89. I'd swapped in a new thirty-round clip after using up some of my bullets during our air battle, but even so, I wasn't confident I could handle a crowd this big. For that matter, I wasn't sure I could bring myself to shoot at unarmed, naked opponents. I didn't even know if shooting these people would actually stop them.

"Uh, Elvia?" I said.

"Yeah?"

"When I give the signal, you grab Hikaru-kun."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?" Hikaru-kun objected. But I didn't have time for a Q and A. The nekkids were almost on us.

"Make sure you close your eyes, too," I added. "Amatena, Clara, same goes for you. I'm going to use something that should blind and deafen them. Hopefully that will stop them long enough for us to get away."

"Understood," Amatena said. I was glad she was quick on the uptake. Elvia and Clara seemed to see what I was getting at, too. Elvia picked up Hikaru-kun in her arms and nodded to me, and then I slung the flashbang grenade whose pin I had already pulled into the crowd.

"Three, two, one—now!" I shouted, and squeezed my eyes shut. The next instant, there was a huge light and a tremendous noise from the grenade. I immediately opened my eyes again, then started running with my Type-89 still in hand.

I had to shove my way past several of the nekkids, pushing or even kicking them down to break through the encirclement. That was

my plan, anyway. I was prepared to shoot some people in the hands or legs if necessary.

But then I felt someone grab my hand from one side. “Wha?!” I exclaimed, shocked. I looked over to see one of the nekkids; she looked like a weretiger.

The flashbang didn’t do anything?!

I was probably more startled by this than I should have been, but I quickly understood. The naked tiger girl I was looking at had her eyes closed. In fact, so did the others. I wasn’t sure if it was simply luck that she had managed to take my hand, or if she had sensed where I was.

The weretiger opened her eyes. They still showed no hint of emotion, but were astonishingly clear. Almost like they were made of glass, like something you might find in a doll.

“Minori-san!” I turned toward Hikaru-kun’s panicked shout to find other members of the nekkids attacking him, Elvia, Amatena, and Clara.

“Sh—!” I slammed the stock of my weapon into my opponent’s chest. Her grip loosened, and I whipped my hand in a Z shape to escape her grasp. This was the basic way of escaping someone else’s grab, working against their joints to free yourself. It was great, as long as they didn’t know kenpo or something themselves.

Then I made to go help Elvia—but an instant later, I found two of the nekkids dive-bombing me from the side.

It was the weretiger, along with another young woman who looked like a werewolf. I used my Type-89 like a club, beating them back. First I jabbed the wolf girl to my left with the muzzle of the gun, then slammed the stock into the weretiger.

Or at least, that was my plan.

“Erk?”

The weretiger dropped to the ground, dodging my blow in a spectacular display of agility. No sooner had I registered her maneuver than, instead of standing up, she planted her hand on the ground and spun, trying to sweep my feet out from under me. I just managed to jump over her leg, but while I was still in the air, the wolf girl got her balance back and grabbed me. I was dragged to the ground.

“Hrgh!”

The wolf girl shimmied around my arm in an instant, climbing onto my back. I could do nothing to resist. I don’t want to brag, but I consider myself a fairly accomplished martial artist. My father taught me when I was young, and then I went through the JSDF’s practical combat training, so I was confident I couldn’t be taken by some rando off the street. I had even managed to go more or less toe to toe with Amatena once. This despite the fact that, as a werewolf, her physical

capabilities were vastly superior to mine. And yet this naked werewolf and tiger girl had me completely helpless. Granted it had been two on one, but I still would have expected to put up more of a fight.

I see. They're...

Not thinking anything. No wonder they weren't embarrassed about being naked. They might not quite be in *mushin*, the state of "no mind" that martial artists sought to achieve, and this wasn't some Buddhist accomplishment of non-self. But it was similar. These people here were having no extraneous thoughts. Maybe they didn't even have a sense of who they were. So all their movements were completely efficient, totally spontaneous, quick and close—they were almost like machines. That was why I had so much trouble reading them. It was like fighting robots; they hardly even seemed to breathe.

They sure knew how to do a joint lock, though. What the hell was going on? It was just conceivable there was a counter to the situation I was in, but...

"Minori!" Amatena and Clara saw I was in dire straits and came rushing over, but they were each promptly grabbed by a nekkid and shortly found themselves on the ground, just like me. Then it was Elvia and Hikaru-kun's turn to be attacked. Nekkids grabbed Elvia's arms and legs, holding her fast.

"Hikaru-sama!" She physically flung him away. Maybe she realized she couldn't escape, and was hoping that at least he could. With a werewolf's physical strength behind the throw, Hikaru-kun found himself lofted easily through the air, but then...

"Elvia!" To my surprise, he spun in midair. He landed neatly on the ground, squaring off with the nekkids who moved to attack him. They grabbed him, but Hikaru-kun shoved them bodily away, fighting back toward Elvia.

"Hikaru-sama...?!" Elvia said, shocked. She was no more surprised than I was. Hikaru-kun didn't have any martial arts moves or fancy tricks, but he pressed on with a speed and strength belying his delicate appearance, carving a swath through the nekkids to get to Elvia. I could only marvel and wonder where he found that sort of power in that petite frame of his.

But of course, his strength wasn't limitless. Just like with Amatena and Clara, the nekkids simply piled after him, one after another, until ultimately Hikaru-kun was dragged down just like the rest of us, his arm twisted behind him.

That was it. They had us all.

"Hrk..." I bit my lip. We might have been able to hold our own against one or two of these people, but with something like fifty of them all ranged against us, escape was going to be all but impossible. And since they had all four of my companions essentially hostage, I

couldn't do anything reckless. I didn't know if the nekkids really understood what a hostage was—but since I hardly knew what they were thinking at all, it was impossible to know what they might do. You couldn't be too careful against opponents like that.

If nothing else, I was being reminded of one very important lesson: battles can be decided by sheer numbers.

Still, I couldn't help noticing something. Other than the ones who were specifically holding us down, twisting arms or whatever else, the nekkids kept their distance, forming a large circle from which they gazed down at us. There was no sign of gloating triumph in their expressions, but neither was there contempt for their defeated foes. The only thing I could see in their eyes was us, reflected in their glassy expressions. What was going to happen to us? What were they going to do to us?

“Are you going to kill us?” I asked experimentally. I was hoping for a negative answer, naturally, but all I got was silence. Not one of the nekkids said anything about what they would or wouldn't do.



The closer we got to the Dragon's Den, the more like a maze the town became. Pillars of flame sprouted everywhere, heating up the surrounding areas. We obviously steered clear of the pillars themselves, but the updrafts they created caused roaring winds, and some of the rubble had begun to warp and bend in the heat. All of which meant there were precious few places we could safely press ahead. I got the distinct impression that even just walking around town was inherently dangerous.

To top it all off, there were more pillars of flame surrounding the Dragon's Den than anywhere else. In some places, they appeared spaced at regular intervals, like a wall. In others, you could get within three hundred meters of the Den before being forced to take a major detour. I was starting to think that that dwarf had been right: whatever was causing these things seemed to be in that building. Although I sort of doubted there was a dragon buried underneath each pillar.

I had a striking thought: was it possible there was an oilfield under our feet? Come to think of it, the whole reason the Japanese government had wanted to invade this other world had been the possibility of procuring heretofore untouched subterranean resources, mineral deposits, that sort of thing. At least during the time I had spent in Eldant, I hadn't seen anyone using coal or oil, and of course there was no electricity. So I guess it was still possible that there were hundreds or thousands of years' accumulation of fossil fuels still

resting just beneath the surface of this world. Maybe enough to completely change Earth's energy situation. Of course that would get the government's attention.

Whether or not you could prove that stuff was there was another matter.

"How about we take a break?" I said to Myusel, looking up at the sky. The pillars of flame made everything warm—downright hot, in fact, so that just walking along was enough to work up a sweat. And even though the sun had gone down, the flames still made it seem bright as noon. At least there was light as we tried to scramble over the piles of rubble.

"In fact, I think some sleep would be a good plan," I said, wiping away some sweat with my sleeve. "I'm worried about your mother, but if we exhaust ourselves getting to her, we won't be able to do anything when we reach her."

"That's true. You're right," Myusel agreed. So we found a building that looked a little less damaged than the others and took refuge inside. We didn't have to get out of "the elements" as such, but we needed something that would help block the heat of the flames. It also might keep us safe from dragon attacks. I hadn't seen the creatures overhead since they had hit our puppet drake, but you could never be too careful.

Myusel and I sat down beside each other, leaning against a wall. It was a relief just to get into the shade, away from the crackling heat of the flames, even if it was probably still at least forty degrees. Or maybe it was the oncoming night that made things feel cooler. I didn't really know.

I let out a long sigh.

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel said, and when I looked over she offered me a canteen.

"Oh, thanks..."

Between being seated in the saddles and definitely not expecting to be attacked in midair, neither Myusel nor I had been carrying much on us. We each had one small canteen of water, but we had already drunk mine dry earlier in the day. If we couldn't find a source of drinking water, things might turn ugly.

I was just putting Myusel's canteen to my lips when it struck me: was this, you know... an indirect kiss? For that matter, Myusel had been drinking from my canteen all day. I hadn't thought too much about it, because it was my canteen and I was just about overwhelmed with the heat anyway, but she had already...

"Shinichi-sama?" Myusel was looking at me curiously. Nothing about this seemed to bother her.

"Oh, uh, yeah, nothing," I said, then awkwardly took a sip from

the canteen.

The bittersweetness! Is this the flavor of an indirect kiss? ...was obviously not my reaction, because it tasted just like any other water. But now that I'd thought about it, I couldn't stop.

"S-So it sucks that most of our baggage was on the puppet drake, huh?" I said quickly, trying to distract myself and keep my mind from getting even deeper into the gutter. "I hope Minori-san and the others are safe."

Even with as fast as we'd left the house, we had still managed to amass a pretty good quantity of weapons, water, and provisions. But there was no telling what had survived that initial attack.

"Yes, I'm worried about them..." Myusel said, casting her eyes down.

D'oh! I realized my mistake. Myusel continually seemed to feel both grateful and apologetic that all of us were going to Bahairam specifically to help her mother. I had tried to tell her that it was really okay, but she wasn't the sort of person to just go "Oh! Well, all right then!"

"Hey, they're a tough bunch! I bet they're fine! I'm probably the weakest link around here!" I was trying to make Myusel feel better, but I mostly succeeded in making myself feel worse. Minori-san, Amatena, and Clara were all basically active-duty military, and even Myusel had been in the army once. Elvia was way stronger than me. As for Hikaru-san, it was easy to underestimate him because he looked so slim, but he did a lot of physical exercise to stay in that sort of shape. He might not be very muscular, but I'll bet he had plenty of stamina. Heck, I'd seen the way he had pulled Elvia back up onto our puppet drake. That must have taken some real strength. Where'd he keep all the muscles on those beanpole arms?

Pathetic. That was the only word for how I felt at that moment.

It wasn't like I doubted Falmelle-san's gift of prophecy, but I couldn't imagine what good me showing up at the Dragon's Den was going to do.

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel leaned against my shoulder.

Wait... She what? She did?!

We were suddenly so close! I mean, our degree of contact just shot up! Was she trying to say *Hold me, embrace me*?! Was this some subtle subliminal signal?! Myusel's hair brushing my cheek was—ahhh it tickled and smelled good, and I—I—I was—!

"Myusel...!" I squeaked. But then I looked over at her. She must have been past her limit, because there she was, leaning against me, breathing softly—asleep. Maybe she hadn't leaned into me on purpose. Maybe she just slid as she pretty much fell unconscious.

"Oh... Yeah." I let out a sigh as I gently took Myusel's shoulders

and guided her slowly to the ground. I arranged her own pack under her head as a pillow, and then I let go of her. She must have been really wiped; she didn't seem to even notice me moving her.

I lay down next to her, putting my jacket over some random debris for a pillow. Okay, so it was a little lumpy, but it was better than nothing.

Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I'd ever slept alone with Myusel.

".....Yoiks."

The idea once again threatened to send my mind to some pretty unseemly places.

"I want your child, Shinichi-sama... Your baby..."

Oh, maaaaaan.....

"Grr... No! Stop!" I grabbed my right hand with my left before it could creep down to something way less chaste than Myusel's shoulder, struggling to ride out the bout of chuuni-ism.

To be fair, I couldn't imagine Myusel saying anything quite that direct. I wasn't sure she was capable of it. But one day—especially with Myusel and Hikaru-san trying to hurry things along—I was going to have to choose someone, or... whatever. Somehow, I was going to have to sort all this out. And when I thought about it calmly, I knew that the possibility that the person I would choose would be Myusel was very, very high.

But when I let myself think about The Future, I found there were a lot of questions. Like, if Myusel and I got married, where would we live? In this world, or Japan? Myusel had asked me once, long ago, to take her with me if I ever went home to Japan. She'd actually been there once now. Could we both be happy over there?

Obviously, Myusel didn't have a family register or even a residence certificate, so getting married might actually prove kind of tricky. Then again, it would be perfectly feasible to have a *de facto* marriage, and just not bother with the bureaucratic red tape...

"I want your child, Shinichi-sama... Your baby..."

.....

Nope. Uh-uh. Done with that. No more flashbacks allowed.

With this quip at my instinctive desire to relive the scene, I mostly managed to regain my rationality. I was already in the middle of a crisis. The last thing I needed to do was waste all my energy on pointless fantasies.

But then again...

“If we did have a kid, I wonder if it could get Japanese citizenship.”

For better or for worse, under Japanese law, there were a variety of social and civil services that would be impossible to access without nationality, and that would make life way harder for the little tyke. At the same time, Japan hadn’t even officially acknowledged the existence of this other world, so we would have to come up with some story about where Myusel was from.

But if we had gotten to that point, it would probably mean I was no longer General Manager of Amutech. And if that was the case, the Japanese government wouldn’t have any motivation to make any special exceptions to help us out. Or, who knew? Maybe someday the government would go public with this world and allow people here to move or naturalize. If they didn’t, well, Myusel and I might manage somehow, but any kid of ours would have a real rough time of it.

“Argh...” I sighed again. I seemed to remember hearing once that love was when two people were happy together; marriage was when everyone else acknowledged it. For me and Myusel, that “everyone else” was basically an international incident waiting to happen. It all felt like too much for me to deal with by myself. Seriously, I had no idea what I was going to do.

I looked at Myusel, whose sleeping face looked like she didn’t have a care in the world. And then, hoping to get some rest myself, I closed my eyes.



“Shinichi.”

I opened my eyes to find myself confronted with pale skin. “Huh...?” The first thing I saw was an abdomen, almost perfectly smooth, only disturbed by a cute little belly button. I let my eyes wander upward, to discover, uh, well, let’s call it a pretty chest, with two slight swells—only slight, even with arms crossed to emphasize them. Above that was a slim neck and a heart-shaped face, as sweet as all the rest.

“P—Petralka?!”

“Mm,” the Eldant empress said, nodding. As you might have guessed by now from my description of her bellybutton and whatever else, Petralka was naked as the day she was born, except, for some reason, for her tiara. She stood in front of me, proud and... well, *tall* would be a misnomer, but...

As for me, if you were wondering, I was lying flat on my back. Plus I found it kind of hard to move my arms and legs—was I tied up or something? What in the world was going on here?

“H-Hey, what is this? Petralka, what—”

“Listen to us, Shinichi,” she said portentously. “We learned this from one of your ‘zines.’” And then she showed me a doujinshi (where had she even been keeping it?)—the kind you get by the wall of the East Building on the last day of Comiket. An especially nasty, filthy one at that.

“One of ‘my zines’? Hold on...” I’d never shown Petralka or the others the smuttiest parts of my collection... had I?! Where the heck had she gotten it from?!

“We believe the phrase *‘fait accompli’* has been thrown around a good deal lately.”

“*Fait accomp*— Hold on, you can’t mean...?!”

“We are now going to create a *fait accompli* of our own.”

“You make it sound like you’re going to make dinner or something!”

“Three-minute *fait accompli*! Just add water!”

“Oh, man! It sounds so *sad* when you say it that way!”

“Or four or five minutes, who cares?! Help us prepare the *fait accompli*!”

And then Petralka jumped on top of me.

Whooooooooaaa! That’s—I mean, she’s jumping me figuratively and literally!

Some people say that if a guy doesn’t want to do it, he can’t actually get “jumped.” In fact, apparently Japanese law doesn’t even account for rape committed by women. But, listen, if you’re a guy and a beautiful, naked woman jumps on top of you, let’s just say your body reacts on its own. Whether you “want” to do it or not doesn’t really factor into it.

I know I tend to focus on how young and underdeveloped Petralka looks, but it’s not like there’s nothing there, and that oh-so-smooth stomach ran up to a cozy-looking chest, and on that chest there were two pink—aaaghhhh! *What am I even doing, wasting time on narrative description at a moment like this?! Anyway, just stay calm—stay calm, my Dohatsuten! (What does that even mean?!)*

“Making your *fait accompli*, step one,” Petralka said, and then she pressed her lips against mine.

Yikes, yikes, yikes!!!

Her tongue, soft and wet, traced its way along my lips, felt its way across— gah! When did Petralka get this... skilled?! *Was she skilled?* Was she secretly one of those people who could twist a cherry stem into a knot with her tongue?!

“We shouldn’t! We can’t! I’m telling you!” I practically shouted, notwithstanding the way my pulse raced to feel her skin against mine. “We can’t, Petralka! *We can’t do this!*”

And to my surprise, Petralka simply leaned away. She was still sitting on top of me, but now she was looking me squarely in the eyes. Her own large, round eyes were suddenly damp.

“Huh?”

“Are we so unpleasant to you, Shinichi?” she asked. Suddenly she was crying. I wasn’t sure whether to think of her as erotic or adorable or *tsundere* as hell, or—okay, not the time.

“Even at this moment, like this, can you not love us?”

“Whoa, hang on...”

I definitely hadn’t expected her to burst into tears, and I had never imagined she would be quite so direct about her feelings. But let’s be fair: she might have been an empress, but she was also a girl, a fact I knew very well. So I guess saying I had “never imagined” this might happen was really just an excuse. But it wasn’t like I was going to suddenly say, “Oh! I didn’t realize!” The best I could manage was total bewilderment...

“Petralka...”

“We... We truly—” She covered her face with her hands.

I could hardly look at her. “I’m sorry, Petralka. I...” But then I realized I wasn’t sure what to say. I felt sad enough that I could have started crying myself.



Then, suddenly, a face popped up from behind Petralka. “Shinichi-sama?”

“Huh? Elvia?”

“I wanna make a *fait accompli*, too!”

She was just as naked as Petralka, practically looking like there could be a “bo-yoiing!” sound effect hanging by her chest. Her tail was wagging furiously behind her.

“Hang on a second. Elvia, what are you doing here?”

“Oh, she isn’t the only one.”

“Oh, no, she isn’t.”

I found Amatena and Clara approaching from either side.

Seriously, hold on a second. What *were* they doing here? And why was every single one of them naked?!

So they were the ones holding me down! Elvia had my feet, Amatena was holding my right hand and Clara my left—and Petralka was still on top of me. No wonder I couldn’t move! Wait... what was even happening?! Was this the curse of the harem?! Was this what I got for taking the harem route in too many gal games?! (Transmission scrambled) Or was this some side effect from reading too many light novels about protags with way too many potential girlfriends? Too much late-night anime? Like, the heroine is a red-haired fire user and within ten minutes of meeting her he’s somehow stumbled into seeing her changing? Wait, but my light-novelist dad told me that was just a way of getting information across, or seeking dramatic efficiency or something, that it just kind of turns out that way—wait, is that even relevant?! (Transmission even more scrambled)

I became increasingly aware of the girls’ skin, their warmth, each distinct and yet all running together. I, uh, probably don’t need to say what was happening between my legs.

“Y’ mean you don’t want a girl in heat?”

“Are you saying you don’t want a bush-tailed soldier?”

“Do you not want a weretiger soldier?”

Uh, those weren’t questions I could answer easily. And, uh, why were Amatena and Clara here, anyway? Sure, Clara had kissed me on the cheek once, and Amatena, I mean, I thought we were friends, but still...

“We will now commence the creation of a *fait accompli*,” Amatena said grimly, like she was announcing the beginning of a surgical procedure or something. Clara, Elvia, and Petralka all nodded. And then...



When I opened my eyes, I found myself staring at the ceiling of a ruined building. “Yes! It was a dream, of course it was! I knew that!” I exclaimed, a little desperately. This wasn’t the first time I’d had a dream quite like that, and I was starting to wonder if it said something about some very deep-seated worries. Then again, maybe it was nothing any healthy guy in his teens wouldn’t have felt if he was cornered by a bunch of cute girls all saying they liked him.

“Are you really that eager to see a naked girl, Kanou Shinichi?!” I demanded of myself, trying to sound extra stern, but... yeah! Yeah, I wanted to see a naked girl. That’s the sort of thing an energetic teenage guy is interested in, right? You know, the smooth, pale skin, the little bump of her belly button. That’s sexy enough, but when you add the softness...

That’s when it struck me. I was supposed to have woken up from my dream already, right? I was sure I had. So what was I doing looking at a girl’s belly button, her stomach, the chest above it and the (omitted) below it?

I sort of choked and sat up, but that just brought my face that much closer to whoever it was standing and looking down at me. Seriously, who was this person?! The sun was at their back and I couldn’t make out their face.

“Huh? Wha? Wh-What’s going on here? Is it all happening again? Am I stuck in some sort of loop?!” It was an overwhelming situation, and it was starting to break me. In fact... The girl looking into my face—was she licking her lips? Like, as if she was saying, *That was tasty?*

No way... It couldn’t be. Did she do something to me while I was asleep?! Was that why Petralka’s kisses seemed so real in my dream?!

That was when Myusel sat up beside me, rubbing her eyes. “Shinichi-sama...?” She looked at me, blinking... And then she froze with an expression of shock. Well, naturally. We try to catch some shut-eye in an earthquake-shattered building and wake up to find a naked girl standing and watching us?

“Shinichi-sama...!” Myusel said again. She wasn’t just looking at the girl standing right in front of me. She was looking past her. Which had to mean...

I deliberately forced myself to look away from the pale, naked body of the girl, following where Myusel was looking instead. And that’s when I discovered several other figures in our building as well. And all of them... naked.

“B-But why?! And who?!” Until this moment, the only other person we’d seen anywhere had been that injured dwarf. So where the heck had all these people come from? And why were they all naked?!

When I looked again, I realized they were also all girls. Three of them appeared to be werewolves, one was a dwarf. The dwarf was the

one looking down at me.

The other naked girls—the werewolves—moved quickly to surround me and Myusel.

“Er, uh, can’t we talk?” I said.

The werewolf girls silently reached out and grabbed Myusel’s and my hands with something like disinterest. They didn’t level weapons at us, didn’t shout. But it was still pretty clear we were coming with them. And that was intimidating. I had no idea what they were going to do with us.

“Shinichi-sama!” Myusel cried, her face stiff, and then she began to intone Tifu Murottsu. But as soon as she did, one of the werewolf girls punched her in the stomach, landing a blow to her solar plexus with terrifying precision. “Hrgh!” Myusel gasped and doubled over in mid-chant.

“Myusel?!”

Shit! I didn’t know who or what these people were, but they understood magic. And they knew how to deal with people trying to use it. Attacking someone trying to prepare a spell was the single most basic countermeasure. As in fiction, so here in reality.

“Myusel, are you okay?!” I rushed over to her. She was still gasping; that must have been a serious punch. I held her in my arms and turned once more to the naked girls. They made no move to attack me—maybe they thought I couldn’t use magic. In fact, they hadn’t even done anything when I had brushed their hands away to go over to Myusel.

Were they... not enemies? Or...

I glanced down at my feet. I hated to leave behind the belongings we had used for pillows, but there was no time to grab anything.

“Grr—!” Still carrying Myusel in my arms, I turned away from the mysterious girls and started running. I didn’t expect to get far, but I kept telling myself I just had to try.



I sat in the mansion’s living room and sighed. I’d come from Japan to bring Shinichi-kun and the others up to date on the outlook and intended future direction of the Japanese government’s policy, but seeing as they were out, I had nothing to do. *Deliver only the message—to the extent possible, do nothing else* had been my strict instructions from above. And so all I could do was sit and wait for them to get back.

“Tea, sir?” said Cerise, a member of the lizardman family left to watch the house, as she set a cup of tea in front of me. She looked at first glance like nothing more than a bipedal lizard, but I was given to

understand that she came from a highly placed family in her own society, and there was an unmistakable air of refinement about her.

“Ah, thank you kindly,” I said, making sure I smiled. She offered tea to Captain Satou, sitting beside me, as well, then bowed and left the room. I could hear shouting from her children, who were waiting in the hall, and then all of their voices growing distant as they walked away.

“Lively bunch,” Captain Satou said with a half-smile. “My older brother and his wife had a place like that, lots of kids.”

“Indeed...” I nodded noncommittally.

Eldant garrison duty was as secret as assignments got, so the JSDF tried to pick soldiers with a minimum of family relations, as the enlistees would be declared officially dead. Captain Satou was single himself. He did not personally know what it was like to be a parent to a house full of children. He had come voluntarily to his current position, but at times I glimpsed in him a real interest in these domestic moments.

I didn’t fault him for it. I myself was single, no wife or children. “Captain Satou,” I said, taking a sheaf of papers out of my bag. I don’t know why I decided to do this at this exact moment. Maybe because I had always intended to show him these materials at some point, and we happened to have nothing to do right now. Yet it would be difficult to say that was my whole reason.

“May I ask what you think of this?” I pointedly took off my magic interpreter ring, making sure he saw me do so. He grasped my intention immediately, removing his own ring as he reached out for the papers. “May I, sir?”

“Please.”

“Thank you.” He scanned the papers I handed him intently. Slowly his square face adapted an expression of shock. “Sir, what... what exactly are you getting at with this?”

Despite the question, I assumed he understood perfectly well. It was simply hard to believe—so hard he didn’t *want* to believe it. He hoped his understanding was mistaken, and wanted me to reassure him. But I could do no such thing.

“These materials,” I said, “appear to indicate that this ‘other world’ may not be so ‘other’ after all. And that undue involvement with it could, at the worst, have immensely destructive consequences.”

Captain Satou’s face darkened. But he said nothing more, just sipped at Cerise’s tea.



I, Kanou Shinichi, am a proud former home security guard.

What I'm really saying is that I didn't get out and exercise much, so (forgive me if this seems obvious) I had something less than average strength and endurance. And it wasn't like I was an anime MC who would just suddenly discover he secretly had the strength of ten men when a crisis loomed.

"Huff... Huff... ... Puff..."

"Shinichi-sama..." Myusel, who was still in my arms, sounded concerned, but I didn't have the wherewithal to answer. I was too busy catching my breath. Myusel was hardly big or heavy, but she was still a good forty—or was that fifty?—kilos. Having to carry her while running as fast as I could from our pursuers meant I was basically carrying twice my normal body weight and trying to go twice my normal speed. My heart and lungs were working a lot harder than normal. You know how in anime they'll shout stuff like "***** rate just passed two hundred percent!"? I always wanted to shout back, "Two hundred percent?! What the heck does that even mean?!" But, well, now I sort of felt like I knew.

The naked girls were still chasing us. I didn't have time to look back and check, but every once in a while I would see a flash of pale skin out of the corner of my eye. Which also made it obvious just how close they were to catching us.

This was bad. I didn't know what to do. I didn't even know who or what those naked girls *were*. Bahairamanian citizens would make the most sense, but then why were they naked? And why wouldn't they say anything to us?

So... Should we stand and fight? I had some compunctions about fighting naked girls—unarmed naked girls at that—but they had attacked Myusel, and there was no telling what they would do to us if they caught us, so maybe now wasn't the time to be getting all gentlemanly. I knew a little magic myself, and if I could avoid getting hit while I chanted like they had done to Myusel... well, maybe I could swing something?

It was a nice thought. It was also the moment a massive shadow swept overhead.

"Dragons!" Myusel groaned.

She was right—dragons, in the flesh. Probably the same ones that had attacked our puppet drake. Three of them, swooping overhead. Just when I thought they might leave us alone, they all pulled one-eighties, turning circles tighter than a fighter jet's, and came back toward us. Wait—but that meant...

The biggest one landed on the building nearby. It appeared to settle almost as gently as a feather, but the structure collapsed from its sheer weight. And then I noticed two more buildings go down, one to

either side. In other words, three dragons were waiting for us up ahead. And the girls were coming up behind.

“We... We’re surrounded!” I wailed, and came to a stop.

Was this just coincidence? No, it couldn’t be. The girls and the dragons had worked together to corner us. They must have had some kind of telepathic communication. But how? Puppet drakes I could understand, but how could they communicate with wild dragons?

I stood bewildered as one of the girls came up to us...

“Hey!” I exclaimed as she wrenched Myusel out of my arms. “Myusel!”

“Shinichi-sama!” She struggled, but she was just no match for a werewolf’s strength. The girl drew her fist back. Maybe she was hoping to punch Myusel again, force her to settle down.

“N-No, doooooon’t!” I cried. I didn’t expect it to count for much, but I couldn’t hold it in. “Stop that!”

Hitting a girl in the stomach—that’s just awful! That’s where babies are kept! Er, although I guess if the girl were to respond, “Okay, but I can punch her in the face, right?” or, “Okay, but it’s fine to punch a man in the stomach, right?” well, I’d be a little bit stuck.

But then the werewolf girl stopped moving. Just for an instant, she turned her expressionless face toward me. “Language detected: Japanese. *Stop*—imperative; a command to immediately cease current activity.”

“Huh?” My eyes went wide. And not just because the wolf girl had suddenly talked.

“Request from Type Three authorized personnel. Acknowledged.”

But because she was speaking Japanese.

That’s when it really sank in for me: she didn’t have a magic interpreter ring. So how was it she was able to telepathically communicate with me? I had learned a bit of Eldant myself by now, but that clearly wasn’t what this girl was speaking. She had been talking to me in my own native language. Japanese. She’d said it herself.

But why? How?

“Does this mean you’ll... listen to me?”

“Affirmative.” The werewolf girl nodded, and then so did the others. Heck, was it just my imagination, or did even the dragons bob their heads? “We will obey you within the parameters of the authority of a Type Three authorized person.”

“Obey...?” The word sounded weirdly erotic coming from her—I mean dangerous—I mean... weird all around. “Um, so, uh... Will you let Myusel... I mean, that girl. Will you let her go?”

“Understood.” The werewolf holding Myusel put her down. She scrambled over to me, practically throwing herself at me. I’m a little

ashamed to say it forced me back a couple steps, but at least I was able to catch her.

“Shinichi-sama!”

“Yeah, it’s all right. Or at least it kinda... seems all right, I guess...” Even I didn’t really know what I was saying, but the point was it looked like these girls were going to listen to me if I asked them to do something. On that subject, what was a Type Three authorized person? And when had I become one?

“So, just to be sure, you’ll listen to what I say, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“Okay, then...” I didn’t know exactly what they would or wouldn’t do, so I decided to do a little test. “Raise your right hand.”

Without so much as a questioning look, the girls all raised their right hands. There was a rush of air as even the dragons lifted their right wings and forearms off the ground. That just about did me in.

“Raise your left hand,” I said. The girls raised their other arms like they were doing a collective *banzai* cheer. “Leave your right hand up.” The girls shifted a little to keep their balance, but maintained the pose. “Don’t put those left arms down.” Even the dragons looked like they were cheering.

“Okay, right arm down. Left arm down. Now raise your right arm without raising your left arm.”

Bam, bam, bam; the girls and the dragons did everything I asked. It was a truly surreal moment.

“Okay, next. Turn around three times and say ‘Arf!’”

“.....Arf.”

Without a hint of hesitation, the girls spun three times, then collectively *arf*’ed. And so did the dragons. They didn’t add “arf” as such, but did give gong-like roars.

Now there was no question. Both the girls and the dragons were prepared to do pretty much whatever I said.

“Geez... Uh, what’s going on here?” I mumbled.

“I’m sure I haven’t any idea...” Myusel said, looking as confused as I felt.

Chapter Four: The Truth That Lies Beneath

The nekkids seemed to know the layout of the Third Capital like the back of their collective hand.

“Look where we are...”

For nearly half a day they marched us through the maze-like town, around fires and rubble, first left, then right, then another turn and another, until we were all sweating. But the place we finally arrived, to our astonishment, was the same Dragon’s Den we’d wanted to get to all along.

There was a small hill surrounded by a brick wall. It was broken in places, and a glance inside revealed a yawning cavern. The entrance must have been at least five meters across. That had to be the Dragon’s Den itself.

The entrance to the cave featured a couple of structures that looked like guardhouses, along with a set of double doors that wouldn’t have been out of place at a castle. They were thick, steel-reinforced affairs that had probably been designed with an eye toward withstanding military assault. A watchtower stood on either side of the gate, and the wall was studded with what I took for gunports—or I guess, in this case, more likely arrowports.

Well, if it looks like a secret military base and quacks like a secret military base...

I was still curious, though.

“What’s going on here?” Amatena asked, turning to one of the nekkids. But the woman didn’t answer, or even react as such. Maybe she didn’t have a language, or maybe she just saw no need for conversation. In any event, having been brought here effectively as captives, we could probably assume now that the Dragon’s Den was the nekkids’ home base. In fact, several more of them were standing in front of the doors, and once we were close enough they opened the doors and ushered us inside.

This was all puzzling enough, but more shocking still was what we found in there. Or more precisely, whom.

It was Myusel—no, it was Falmelle Faugron. The cave entrance gave onto a large plaza currently populated by something more than a hundred people—these ones properly clothed. And Myusel’s mother was standing at the head of the group.

“Faugron-san!” I cried, and thankfully, she seemed to recognize me immediately.

“You’re the young woman from the mansion...”

“Koganuma Minori, ma’am. Kanou Shinichi-kun’s bodyguard.” I rushed over to her. To my surprise, the nekkids didn’t really react even when I started to run. Maybe they figured a human like me couldn’t escape at running pace—or maybe there was some other reason.

“You have brought Shinichi-kun, haven’t you?” Falmelle-san said, looking at me, then at Amatena and Clara behind me.

“Er, I’m afraid not exactly...” It was hard to have to give her the grim news when she looked so glad to see us. “See, he *was* here. Until the dragon attack... Shinichi-kun and Myusel both know about the Dragon’s Den, and if they’re in one piece, I’m sure they’re making their way here. But I don’t know if they *are* in one piece.”

Falmelle-san’s face darkened. “That’s certainly troubling...” She must have been disappointed that Shinichi-kun wasn’t here, but it couldn’t have been easy for her to hear that her daughter was missing, too. Myusel had served in the military once, yes, but these days she was just a maid. She probably wasn’t equipped to handle a moment of complete crisis like this.

“Faugron-san, who are these people?” I asked, indicating the fully-dressed people around us.

“They’re my employees, and a few Bahairamanian citizens who weren’t able to get out in time.”

“Get out?”

“You’ve seen the pillars of fire, right? There was a massive earthquake and they came sprouting up from the ground. As soon as the destruction started, the Bahairamanian military began evacuating civilians. They got most of them out of the city, but then almost a dozen dragons showed up, and they weren’t able to come back for the rest. The people who couldn’t get out with that first wave are standing here now.”

“Wow...” So that was why the city streets had looked abandoned except for the nekkids. I was impressed that the military had been able to evacuate most of the city’s population in barely half a day, but my understanding was that Bahairam had a basically collectivist culture. Maybe they would have been more prepared to simply follow the army’s orders than people in some places.

“And that’s when they showed up,” Falmelle-san said, glancing at the nekkids. “They came out of this place, the Dragon’s Den.”

“So do you think they’re the special unit that’s supposed to guard this place.”

“Absolutely not,” Amatena interjected. “The Undertakers—the

special unit assigned to the Dragon's Den—are highly intelligent soldiers handpicked for their loyalty to the father-ruler. They aren't naked brats who do inexplicable things for no apparent reason."

"I guess you might be right..." I said.

"What's more, I believe the majority of the Undertakers are supposed to be men," Clara added.

I got the hint. The all-lady squad that was the nekkids wasn't likely to be the Undertakers. I followed the logic, sure. But then where had the nekkids come from? I looked around at them with a frown.

That was when someone said: "They're BOUs."

"Huh...?" I looked in Hikaru-san's direction, because the language I had heard was Japanese. Not telepathically mediated by the magic ring, but actual, real Japanese words. Hikaru-san, though, looked just as surprised as I did. So he wasn't the one who had spoken? To be fair, it hadn't sounded like him.

I looked all over, trying to determine the source of the voice, and that was when the assembled Bahairamanians parted to either side, like the sea. It was like something out of a movie. And a single young woman came walking between them toward us. She moved with a pronounced sense of her own importance. Unlike the nekkids, she had clothing on, but it wasn't a typical Bahairamanian outfit. Her clothes were mostly white, and the material looked exceptionally thin, like it was designed to prioritize flexibility. In fact, it almost looked like a leotard or a wetsuit, the curves and lines of her body clearly visible.

The outfit actually showed skin in some places, producing a unique effect, as if it were actually body paint, or as though cloth had simply been stuck to her bare skin. There were circular things that looked a lot like machines of some kind around both her wrists as well as her knees. It was all very futuristic, or at least sci-fi-ish.

Her long, flaxen hair was tied up in twintails, likewise held back by mechanical-looking bits. Her face was cuteness itself, but she also gave off a somehow stiff, doll-like impression. And there was one more hint that this girl was something unusual: her eyes were red as blood.

But the strangest thing of all had to do with the exposed skin—above her chest and below her neck; in other words, right along her collarbone. Three interlocking diamonds appeared to be traced on the pale skin there; they were translucent and actually seemed to be shining with a bluish light. They weren't tattoos, that much was clear. And they weren't painted on. It really looked like something was embedded just under the skin. Like if you were to carve a face in a mannequin and run it full of glowing resin.

The thought flitted through my head: was she a cyborg? Or an android? Her body definitely gave the appearance of being stiffer and

more mechanical than a normal living person. And she also seemed to know something we didn't.

"BOU...? What's that?" I asked, and when the young woman had stopped in front of me, she said: "Oh? Don't you understand the English acronym? Allow me to rephrase: Bionic Organoid Unit. Organic-mechanical hybrids created via biological engineering. But let's drop the product description and the fiddly little names. They're living weapons."

I didn't say anything. I was lost for words. I had always taken this fantasy world for just that—pretty much a stereotypical "other world." I had never, ever expected to hear anyone born and raised here talk about English, or use acronyms that sounded like they came from a sci-fi story.

I do remember Shinichi-kun was awfully fixated on that Forbidden Armor...

The suits of armor, cause of a fair amount of grief for us, had also seemed like something from a science fiction story. They looked like exoskeletons, and I had once seen something that looked like an alphabet appear on their surface. Just for an instant, so I hadn't been completely sure what I had seen.

What was going on here?

"Living weapons?"

"That's right. Surely this isn't the first time you've seen them. That group looks feral, though." To my amazement, the young woman pointed to Elvia, Amatena, and Clara.

"Guh?!" Elvia looked surprised. "Whazzat? Something about me?!" She was confused—we were speaking to each other directly in Japanese, and she wasn't following the conversation. My side was probably being communicated to her by my magic ring, but that wouldn't be enough to understand what was going on. Heck, she probably still wouldn't have gotten words like "bionic" or "organoids." The rings could only translate words for which concepts existed in the local language.

"So, uh, who are you, if I may ask? Are you with them?"

"I am—" But before the young woman could explain, there was a massive *BOOM*. Obviously something being destroyed. Then the doors flew open and a dragon, which must have slammed itself into the gates, came tumbling into the Dragon's Den.

"Huh?!"

Elvia and the others prepared for a fight, while the Bahairamanian civilians and the employees of Faugron & Associates tried to make themselves as small as possible. The promptness of their reaction suggested this wasn't the first such incursion they had witnessed.

And then I heard it: "Gaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!" A cry, clearly not

that of the dragon.

“Shinichi-kun?!” There he was, the boy I was supposed to protect, clinging to the back of the dragon. And Myusel seemed to be with him.

“Onward!” he shouted, pointing deeper into the Den. I wasn’t sure he even realized we were there. The dragon didn’t look like a puppet drake, yet for some reason it obeyed Shinichi-kun, trundling deeper into the cave.

But then the young woman spoke one quiet word, a whisper, in fact: “Stop.” And the dragon stopped cold. It halted so fast it almost seemed to defy the laws of physics. I thought I heard a humming and saw a slight distortion around its wings, but maybe I was just imagining it.

The dragon dipped its head like a servant bowing before its master. Which meant...

“Huh?!” Shinichi-kun exclaimed as he and Myusel were thrown off the dragon’s back and rolled onto the ground. Even that wasn’t enough to exhaust their momentum; they came tumbling right over to where the rest of us were standing. *Thump*. Ooh. That sounded painful.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Shinichi-kun said, clutching his head as if to underline my suspicions. Beside him, Myusel was frowning, too; she had probably bumped something on the way over. No obvious injuries, though.

“*What* are you doing?” I asked. The words were out of my mouth before I could even think about rejoicing that they were safe or anything else.

“It didn’t work like it does in the movies,” Shinichi-kun said, still rubbing his head.

“What do you mean? What movies?”

“Doesn’t this seem like the sort of thing that would happen in some big Hollywood blockbuster? By the way, great to see you’re safe, Minori-san, that’s what counts.”

“You, too. You okay, Myusel?”

“I—I think so...” Myusel said, sitting up.

“Myusel!” Falmelle-san cried, rushing over.

“Yes? Oh... Mother?!” She blinked to discover it was her mother running to greet her. Falmelle-san knelt in front of her daughter and wrapped her up in a hug. She quickly let go, but then started looking at Myusel critically. “You’re not hurt?”

“No, I... I don’t think so.”

“Thank goodness...” Falmelle-san let out a breath. “I grant that I knew by summoning Shinichi-san here, there was a good chance you would come with him.”

“Er, um, yes,” Myusel said, still blinking. It was starting to look like Myusel’s single-mindedness, the willingness to risk her life when someone she cared about was involved, and her ability to tune out even the most dangerous situations all came directly from her mother. Not to say that the reunion between mother and daughter wasn’t touching.

“That’s so weird, though,” Shinichi-kun was muttering. “Why did it...”

“What’s weird?” I asked.

“Well, it’s just, this dragon’s been listening to what I tell it, so I had it bring us here. But...”

But right at the end, the dragon had listened to the young woman and not to him. It was puzzling enough why the monster had ever listened to Shinichi-kun at all.

“That’s because you are a Type Three authorized person.”

“Yeah, that’s right, it had something to do with me being a Type Three authorized—wait, what?” Shinichi-kun said, looking at the young woman. He blinked, then said, “Uh, who’s this girl?”

“Don’t look at me,” I said with a shrug.

The girl walked over to Shinichi-kun and answered him herself. “I am Major Theresa Bigelow, commander, Eighth Special Patrol Unit, Third Regional Army of the North American Union. Or to be more precise, a replica thereof.”

“The North American... what?” Shinichi-kun looked at me for help, but I was just as confused by the girl’s introduction as he was.

“The reason the air-assault BOU Type 02R, nicknamed dragoon, didn’t listen to you was because I, a Type One authorized person, ordered it to stop. Type Three personnel are typically civilians we’ve been charged with protecting, or at least ordinary soldiers. They’re able to command most BOUs most of the time, but in the event of an emergency, the units will prioritize the orders of a Type One authorized person. *Always*.”

Then the girl—Theresa—reached toward Shinichi-kun’s neck.

“Uh—um, what is it?”

“You should have an authorization imprinted here.” She touched his neck, and to my surprise, a geometric pattern that looked a lot like a barcode appeared. I had never seen it before—it was like one of those invisible inks that only appears under certain conditions.

“Hey, when did that get there?”

“Let me guess,” Theresa said, narrowing her eyes. “You piloted one of the PDWS units without knowing anything about it.”

“PDWS?”

“Personal Defense Weapon System. A combat suit, if you prefer the old lingo. This authorization indicates you piloted the prototype

Iron Crab F. Daring for a man to use it.”

“Oh!” Shinichi-kun and I both realized what the PDWS must be at exactly the same moment. The Forbidden Armor.

“In any event, using the PDWS resulted in your being treated as an attaché of the military. And granted Type Three authorized personnel status as well.”

“I can’t say I follow,” Shinichi-kun responded, cocking his head. “But this is because I used the Forbidden Armor—or PDWS or whatever? But Myusel and Elvia used it, too. Aren’t they Type Three authorized personnel?”

“Myusel. Elvia. Are those the names of your feral BOUs?” Theresa looked in Myusel’s direction. “Ah, I see. This one’s an elf-type hybrid. It doesn’t matter, authorization is never granted to BOUs. Type One, Two, or Three, they are only given to full-blooded humans.”

Shinichi-kun and I looked at each other, struck dumb. The upshot seemed to be that by putting on the Forbidden Armor, and also being human, he had acquired whatever this authorization was. But Myusel and Elvia, being demi-human or related to a demi-human, weren’t eligible for the same thing.

“What are these BOUs she keeps talking about, anyway?” Shinichi-kun said.

“I guess it’s short for Bionic Organoid Unit,” I told him.

“Bionic...?” He blinked. “You think they cost six million dollars each? Do they go into slow motion and get cool sound effects when they activate their powers?”

“You’ve really got a thing for vintage foreign dramas, don’t you?”

“Funny, you seem to know what it is. I assume you weren’t even born when it was showing.”

“My dad had the DVDs in his library.” We must have sounded downright relaxed. Finally I sighed and said, “Well, at least it looks like your brain is still doing its normal thing. That’s kind of reassuring.”



The girl, Theresa Bigelow, was not human.

“There’s some disagreement about whether Duplicates are humans or not,” she said as she led us through the tunnel, which was about two meters in diameter and sloped gently downward.

According to Theresa, the more precise explanation was that they *had* been human, but their original bodies were now dead, their personalities rendered as data and stored in a new housing. She claimed that in the society she was—or anyway, had been—a part of, personality-replica data was treated the same way the original was, so

that for all intents and purposes she was viewed as the same person, and inherited the station her “living” body had possessed.

“You know, I keep wondering. That thing on your chest...”

“Ah. The nucleus of this avatar. What about it?” She looked genuinely puzzled as she led us deeper into the Dragon’s Den.

Theresa’s outfit showed a fair amount of skin, and across her clavicle a pattern of three interlinked diamonds was clearly visible. It even seemed to be glowing a sort of bluish white. Not like it was painted on the skin, but almost as if a component, if you will, in that shape was buried just under the skin. It was sort of like—you know the clear parts that come with plastic models sometimes? It was sort of like that. It wasn’t perfectly flush; whatever it was created ridges and depressions in the skin.

I remembered seeing something similar once—the shape was different, but the weird glowing thing was the same. It had happened when Hikaru-san put on a necklace he’d gotten from Romilda, and this sort of Slime-like thing had created a female version of him.

“It’s just that I ran into something similar once,” I said.

“Similar, my ass,” Theresa said. She stopped and looked at Hikaru-san. “Your little friend there is using an avatar just like me, isn’t he?”

“Uh...?” Now I looked at Hikaru-san, too. He just shrugged as if to say, *You got me*.

I remembered the way he had pulled Elvia up when she had been about to fall off the puppet drake. Like it was almost easy for him. I should’ve realized the real Hikaru-san didn’t have that kind of strength in his body.

“I’ve been, uh, using it ever since. It comes when I call.” Hikaru-san looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable; he wouldn’t quite meet my eyes.

So apparently he could control that female body any time he put on the choker. Hikaru-san himself was probably back in Eldant right now, and this was the female version of him following us around.

“I get it,” I said, looking at Theresa again. While Hikaru-san used this “avatar,” his real body would be asleep. I guess one consciousness couldn’t control two bodies. It was like there was some kind of communication network connecting the person to the avatar; the avatar didn’t have a consciousness of its own.

That raised the question: where was Hikaru-san’s consciousness right now?

It’s a pretty common trope in cyberpunk SF stuff: you set up some kind of direct connection to the brain to create a system where you can transfer information. And a lot of the time, those systems involve extra bits and pieces added on to the brain. In other words, you could think of the communications network and the avatar as an actual part

of Hikaru-san. That would make the question of whether the avatar was an artificial construct sort of moot. Think about a glass eye, a prosthetic hand, or even more simply, false teeth. They can be considered part of the person they belong to; it doesn't really matter that on some level, they're artificial.

But that raised some even more troubling questions. If your brain had been expanded by some external system, where did you do your thinking? *Your original brain* might seem to be the obvious answer, but what if the expansion system could copy the same network of nerves that allowed you to do your thinking in the first place? Then you could do your thinking over there.

On top of that, your brain is kind of a lazy bastard. Or to be more accurate, its cells are dying every day, but unlike other cells in your body, brain cells don't regenerate. Once you're born, it's all downhill from there.

But look: you had people who had lost brain cells due to accidents or illnesses, but a lot of them got along just fine. Apparently, previously unused neurons would create new neural connections to compensate for the lost cells. See? One part of the brain could fill in for another. So if you had an external apparatus with electrical pathways that was capable of replicating brain function, who was to say a person's consciousness might not "flow out" into that apparatus? Maybe you could move your consciousness from one container to another as readily as you could change cars or clothes.

Suppose, just for example, that there was an online game that could perfectly emulate all the functions of your physical body in a virtual space. And suppose the brain of a user of that game was destroyed. Would the user's consciousness disappear at that instant? Or would it remain, *as consciousness*, in the network?

Theresa seemed to be my answer: it didn't disappear. Theresa's "original" human form was long dead, the organic body already gone, and yet the information that constituted Theresa's consciousness was still here, in this "avatar." Whether or not to consider the entity in front of me the "real" Theresa or not was an almost religious question: it touched on the existence or nonexistence of a soul.

The question of identity isn't limited to cyberpunk. Suppose you had a car, and every day you changed one part of it for another part. What percentage of the parts would you have to change before it was no longer the same car? What percentage of the parts would have to be original for it to be declared the "original" car? That's the sort of question we were debating here.

"Shinichi-sama...?" Myusel was looking at me, concerned. "Is something the matter?"

"Oh, uh, no, everything's fine. Just thinking a little too hard," I

said with a wry grin. I guess all the ruminating about tough sci-fi topics had left me with a frown on my face.

“We’re here,” Theresa announced at length.

We had come to the end of the long tunnel, and found ourselves in a massive—I mean terrifyingly huge—underground facility. It reminded me a little of the Guld Workshop beneath Eldant, but where the dwarves liked lots of tunnels, the Dragon’s Den was pretty much one vast space. It was like they had taken the Tokyo Dome and every giant building around it and buried them all underground. It was almost overwhelming, the way the Dragon’s Den confronted you when you came out of that constricting tunnel.

“Oh my God...” I stood, flabbergasted. We had assumed from the name Dragon’s Den that there were, you know, dragons down here or something, hatching eggs. I’d thought maybe it was like an ant hill, with a “Queen Dragon” surrounded by scurrying workers and a pile of eggs. Anyway, it had to be something like that, right?

Wrong. It turned out the reality was something else entirely. It was unmistakably...

“A factory?!”

It was the only word I could come up with for what I was seeing. The space, divided into square sectors, was packed with what seemed to be highly polished machines. Piping ran everywhere, like blood vessels; the whole thing felt more than anything else like a steelworks or a chemical refinery plant.

“It looks like parts of it are... broken,” Hikaru-san observed. Just as he said, some of the machines looked like they’d seen better days, and fluid was leaking from broken pipes here and there. Those problems really stood out, considering how neat and orderly the rest of the place looked.

“The plans were supposed to have been checked and double checked,” Theresa said, folding her arms and regarding the damage critically. “A look at the records indicates several larger-than-expected seismic events, resulting in some areas that have yet to be repaired.”

“Are you saying... Has this facility been here for hundreds of years?”

“I can’t be certain. I was only just reactivated, myself,” Theresa said, tilting her head as if puzzled. “But the last records would seem to indicate that at least five thousand years have passed.”

“Five *thousand*?”

Living just after the year 2000 by the Western calendar, it was hard for me to even imagine a span of time like that. Five thousand years. Five thousand years *ago*. That seemed like long enough for civilization to rise and fall two or three times. And she’d said “at least”...

“This place was temporarily shut down when the truce accords were signed. Abandoned, practically speaking, with entry from the above-ground tunnels closed off. The idealists always did see the BOU facilities as the enemy...” Theresa sounded uncommonly earnest.

The idealists. It seemed like she was using the word to mean something subtly different from what we might have meant by it.

“And this country that made the feral BOUs—Bahairam, did you call it?—they found and excavated the first floor of the facility and started using it.”

I exchanged a look with Minori-san and Hikaru-san. Was this really it, then? The product of an ancient super-civilization here in this other world? Built five thousand years ago. By a culture five millennia old. It was head-spinning. But Theresa wasn’t done.

“This facility has a second and the third floor. When I was put into suspended animation, they put me on the second floor. Same place they produce the land-infantry BOUs.”

“Land-infantry...?” That must be what she called the naked girls who had brought us here. That would mean they had originally been created as weapons. Maybe that was why they weren’t wearing any clothes. They had just come off the production line, no time to get equipment or outfits. They’d been sent straight out on assignment. Or in Theresa’s view, maybe they weren’t any different from tanks or fighter jets—they didn’t need clothes to do their jobs.

“Um, Theresa, uh, -san?”

“What?” She stopped and looked back at me.

“You seem to see Myusel, Elvia, Amatena, Clara, and even Falmelle-san as BOUs, right?”

“That’s right.”

“But Myusel has a mother, and Elvia and her sisters—I mean, they weren’t built here, were they?”

“Of course we weren’t,” Amatena said. Theresa and I were speaking Japanese, so Amatena would have no way of knowing what exactly we were saying, but then again, she could still catch at least my side of the conversation.

“Myusel, Elvia, and Amatena are all different from your BOUs,” I said.

“No, they aren’t,” Theresa said flatly. “Elf-type and Werewolf-type infantry BOUs, along with dwarf-type and lizardman-type units, were all designed and produced in accordance with different objectives. Look at the production line on the second floor and see for yourself. There are hundreds of pre-activation BOUs still floating in the cultivation tubs.”

“But—”

“If they don’t appear exactly identical, it’s only a matter of

whether they've gone feral."

"Gone feral...?" I suddenly had this weird image of the African savanna, or maybe an alley cat somewhere.

"The idealists were all hung up on the idea of BOU human rights. Even started experimentally providing them with consciousness and reproductive ability, if you can believe it. In order to lend credence to their own arguments. My assumption would be that some of those experimental BOUs went feral, reproduced... and what we have here are their descendants."

An image from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* flashed through my mind. Adam and Eve. The idea that all of humanity originated with a single man and woman. The human race should have been able to live out an immortal eternity in Paradise, but deceived by the serpent, the man and the woman ate from the Tree of Knowledge and were chased out. From then on they would be terrorized by death, and would have to struggle to gain their living. No longer immortal, the man and the woman had to begin to bear children instead.

But that was just a legend, right? Yet what if something similar had happened to these BOUs?

"You've also seen the Air Superiority BOUs—the Type 02R Dragoons. Production facilities for them were located on the first floor of this building." Theresa pointed up ahead. There was something that looked like a pool of liquid, and submerged inside I could see what appeared to be a massive dragon. "This first floor was the only one the people from Bahairam managed to excavate. Looks like that was enough for them. They appear to have carried off the complete Type 02Rs that were already here. As far as I can tell, some sort of seismic activity broke the seal here on the first floor and restarted the system. Production of Type 02Rs resumed in a limited fashion. But I've just been reactivated myself, and just how limited a fashion it is, I couldn't tell without checking the logs."

I was silent. What could I possibly say? Nobody would have been stupid enough to build something like this as a joke, or just to trick us. I had to assume everything Theresa was telling us was true. What if all the demi-humans in this world were really the products of genetic manipulation? Or more to the point, what if, like the dragons or whatever else, they were completely artificial?

"Feral BOUs excavating this facility and putting it to their own use. Who could have imagined?" Theresa said, and scowled openly.



Our Eldant Empire has long been at odds with the Kingdom of Bahairam. To put it briefly, we are enemies. We share a border, which

has led to more than one dispute in the past. Particularly in light of how quickly Bahairam developed, its hunger for more territory was considerable. Then there is the fact that much of the land it possesses is wasteland or desert, places from which it is hard to coax agriculture. This made the relatively productive land of our empire, with its reliable harvests, particularly attractive.

There has never been an all-out war that threatened to destroy us both, but skirmishes are a regular occurrence. As, of course, are spies, which the King of Bahairam sends frequently in attempts to gather intelligence on the state of our nation. As we, of course, do to them. We have dozens of active agents at this very moment.

“The Third Capital, you say?”

In the middle of Marinos, the capital of the Eldant Empire, there was a building called Holy Eldant Castle. Most people called it “the imperial castle” or even simply “the castle.” It was the image and symbol of the Eldant state, and the residence of its all-powerful empress.

In the castle, there were audience rooms. Several such rooms were available in which the empress and her advisors could meet with subordinates and visitors, and the one we currently occupied was comparatively small. Not the one used for official business, but for more intimate matters. The same room in which we frequently received reports from Kanou Shinichi about the running of Amutech.

But at this moment, I, Garius en Cordobal, and Her Majesty the Empress, Petralka an Eldant III, were receiving a report not from any employee of Amutech, but from the handler of our spies in Bahairam, Count Radom.

“Indeed, Majesty. Confusion reigns there. It seems the entire city is engulfed in flames,” Radom said.

Count Radom was short and rotund, bald, with a flat, round nose, and he always seemed to be smiling. He made a very charming, nonthreatening impression. He had come to us via the military, but martial affairs were not his strong suit. Neither, indeed, was physical exercise. But what he did have was an immensely sharp mind and a gift for working quickly. He knew how to improvise. When relations had been opened with the Japanese government, Radom had been ordered to keep a keen eye on affairs at Amutech; he had likewise closely investigated and ultimately helped implement Shinichi’s idea for a double agent (I refer to the case of Elvia Harneiman).

There are many things that can make a person betray their own country: money, sex, the threat of violence, and more besides. Count Radom knew how to use each of them, so that now we had turned nearly thirty of Bahairam’s own agents against it.

Yes, Radom was much sharper than he looked.

“In addition to the first agent to report on this to me, I’ve confirmed it by several other means. It seems to be the case that huge numbers of citizens are evacuating the Third Capital, with the military moving them to the Second Capital. The nation has a tradition of moving the capital around periodically, so a change of location isn’t that difficult for the citizenry.” Radom smiled, a look rather at odds with the events he was describing. “Whatever else is going on, this much we can be sure of: the Kingdom of Bahairam is in an uproar. There is even talk that an important military facility has been left exposed in the Third Capital...”

“Hmm?” Her Majesty said from her throne, looking puzzled. She probably didn’t understand why Count Radom had deliberately let slip this tidbit of information. For better or for worse, Her Majesty was both very serious and very kind. And she was still a child. She knew little about—perhaps could hardly imagine—real, no-holds-barred battle between two countries.

“And what is it you are proposing we do?” she said.

“This might be an opportune moment,” I whispered to her, leaning closer, “to attack Bahairam.”

Her Majesty looked surprised, but didn’t object as such. She was probably all too aware that she was not the most knowledgeable military commander.

Radom went on: “The Third Capital is the closest of Bahairam’s four capitals to the Eldant border. And the fact that a military facility is located there is evidence that it is a base for the invasion of our nation. If we strike now and disable it, then we would be in an excellent position, whether to destroy Bahairam entirely or simply to defend ourselves against her advances. Under normal circumstances, one would expect the facility to be heavily guarded, even when the capital was elsewhere. But *now*...”

“Indeed...” Her Majesty gave a small nod. “But if Bahairam has abandoned this Third Capital, something serious must have happened, no? You said something about it being engulfed in flames. Even if we were to commit our forces, would they be able to hold the area? How would we supply our troops? We assume there would not be much to be found on the ground if so much of the city has indeed been burned up.”

Count Radom stopped, his eyes wide. I suppose he never expected Her Majesty to start talking about supply trains and the provision of troops. It was, in fact, only recently that our army had begun talking seriously about supplies. Before that, the army had always obtained whatever it needed from the regions it passed through, or at its destination. To bring provisions all the way from the home country had been ridiculed as inefficient.

“Minister Cordobal...”

“Mm. Her Majesty has been much interested in this recently,” I said, and produced a book. It was something we had obtained from Ja-pan, another item of otaku culture. “It is called the *Legend of the Galact** Heroes*.”

“*Legend of the...*?”

“In effect, a military history.”

“Indeed, sir...?” Radom nodded, appearing impressed.

“I read it myself, and I must say it’s thought-provoking.”

“You were quite interested in Mitt**meyer, Garius, yes?” Her Majesty said.

“I was, Your Majesty. And I believe you were for the Wizard.”

“Yes, yes. We very much appreciated his bumbling character.”

For once in his life, Radom looked completely befuddled.

“In any case,” I said, concluding the tangent with a cough. “The Faldra squad’s training continues apace. It would not be difficult to get across the border, but as Her Majesty says, supplies might be problematic.”

“We do have plans prepared for the procurement of at least some provisions...”

“Hmm,” I grunted, crossing my arms. Count Radom didn’t appear to be of the opinion that we absolutely had to attack this moment. He was a soldier, yes, but he wasn’t the one who would actually be leading any offensive. He was about the least interested person in doing deeds of valor on the field of battle. So for him, the idea of taking this opportunity to move against Bahairam’s Third Capital was nothing more than a suggestion.

It would, admittedly, offer a bloodless chance to occupy the city. That was certainly attractive. “Your Majesty. Allow me to express my agreement with Count Radom,” I said. “We should occupy the Third Capital. Then we could potentially ransom it against the return of military prisoners Bahairam is holding. Consider it an ace up our sleeve.”

“Indeed...” Her Majesty mused.

“As for the securing of our supply lines,” Count Radom ventured, “if we could obtain the cooperation of the Kingdom of Zwelberich... Well, it would be a somewhat circuitous route, but perhaps feasible...”

The Kingdom of Zwelberich was another nation that shared a border with Bahairam. They had a favorable attitude toward us, and getting them to work with us would probably not be so difficult. Granted, if we were careless, there could be squabbling about how to divide the “spoils” after the occupation of the city... but if we got there first, well, we could talk our way out of just about everything else.

“I think that seems a reasonable idea.”

“Hm. We agree.” Her Majesty nodded. “In that case, we shall entrust this matter to Garius. Fill out the details of Count Radom’s plan, convene a council of war, and—”

But then she suddenly stopped, looking somewhat stricken. At first, we weren’t sure what it was. Half a second later, I registered that it was a creaking sound. But what in the world was making it?

That was when the ground seemed to jump.

“Wha—?!”

It seemed impossible. The floor beneath our feet was shaking. No, perhaps the entire castle. Holy Eldant Castle, carved from a mountain, seemingly unshakable, was quaking.

“Wh-What the—?!”

“What’s going on?” Her Majesty, looking startled, had gotten up out of her throne, but found herself tossed back down into it by the ceaseless shaking. Count Radom had simply sat down on the floor, and I braced myself with a hand against the backrest of the throne to keep myself from falling. Was this... Could it be...?

“Is this what they call an earthquake?” Her Majesty murmured.

Yes. An earthquake. I was familiar with the word, as I was sure Count Radom was as well. It was what one called the phenomenon when the ground shook. I recalled Shinichi saying they occurred fairly frequently in Ja-pan, but here in the Eldant Empire, there might be just one every ten years.

“Wh-What do we—What do we do?” Her Majesty asked, looking pale. But then: “Oh.”

The shaking stopped as suddenly as it had begun.

We stood, blinking and looking at each other. None of us had ever experienced a real earthquake before, so none of us felt certain that it was actually over. Her Majesty got cautiously to her feet, but the shaking didn’t resume. It was as if those few moments had been an illusion. But a close look revealed a number of furnishings in the audience chamber had toppled over. Water was pouring from a broken vase onto the floor.

“Garius,” Her Majesty said.

“Immediately, milady,” I replied with a bow.

She didn’t have to say exactly what she meant. I knew she wanted me to find out the situation in the town around us. If the castle itself had shaken so violently, there was a distinct possibility things had been much worse in the city. Buildings might have collapsed. We people of Eldant so rarely experienced earthquakes that we didn’t necessarily know what to do when they happened. People could be panicking.

In fact, confusion reigned even in the palace itself, with cries of

fear and shouts of anger echoing around the halls. We could hear several voices clear through the doors.

“You must excuse us, Count Radom,” Her Majesty said. The Count still hadn’t gotten to his feet. “We appreciate your advice, but as you can see, the immediate dispatch of military force has become difficult.”

“Yes... Of course, I see that,” the Count said, nodding. He finally stood up, brushing dust off his clothes. “I sincerely appreciate your consideration, Your Majesty. I shall accompany Minister Cordobal to observe the city. We will help the people if they need it.”

“Very good.” Her Majesty nodded and we all bowed to each other.



The beginning of the twenty-first century. Barriers to genetic manipulation are falling around the world: China allows experiments with human DNA replacement, while in America genetically modified salmon is approved for sale. Genetically modified lifeforms are no longer just the subjects of academic debates or laboratory experiments; slowly but surely, they begin to filter into everyday life.

And then there was nanotechnology, which began to flourish from the latter half of the twenty-first century into the beginning of the twenty-second. Much like the way space-travel technology boomed for a while and then suddenly atrophied as budgets and political support dried up, electronic engineering was almost single-handedly put out to pasture by the appearance of quantum computers. Investment and human resources poured into genetic engineering and nanotechnology thanks to a number of pressing needs: the world economy and food supply, medicine, and more besides. The fields exploded.

And so we come to the second half of the twenty-second century. The generation that had objected to genetic manipulation had largely left the scene, and one raised on genetically engineered foods was in control. Humankind was no longer merely “improving” existing lifeforms, but through the use of nanotechnology, was creating entirely new ones.

It wasn’t as though living cells and nanotech machines were so different, not once you got down to the molecular level. The production of new life-forms by the deft combination of cellular material with sufficiently advanced nanotechnology was, one could argue, a perfectly natural thing for science to strive for.

Scientists, creators, always ultimately look back to the dreams of their youth. As the generation who grew up with *Astro Boy* created the bipedal robot ASIMO; as those weaned on giant-robot anime developed heavy units with “arms”; as those who had read *Starship*

Troopers in their childhoods created powered suits. The romance of one's early dreams never quite fades. Was it not almost natural that researchers faced with the possibility of creating new life-forms would turn to the creatures found in their fairy tales, or in the anime, manga, and movies they remembered?

Dragons. Unicorns. Mandrakes. Cho**bos. Pika**us. Koma**ns. Fantastical creatures that could only have existed in fiction could come to reality thanks to genetic engineering and nanotechnology; could find a place and a role to play in human society. They helped mellow people's instinctive aversion to "man-made" lifeforms, and with a bit of a push from people with a special gift for seeing the value in cutting-edge technology, production began of life-forms that looked like humans.

Elves. Dwarves. Werewolves. Weretigers. Werebears. Lizardmen. Each of these was given some visible difference from "real" humans to mark them out as artificial life-forms. They filled needs in every sphere of life, from childcare to military service, and as production kept expanding, suddenly there were more than a billion of them populating the world.

But that wasn't the only revolution. In the twenty-third century, information networks switched from electrical wires and fiber optics to complex webs of nanomachines that formed an almost literal "cloud" over the world. Elves and dwarves were programmed to have especially efficient access to this network, whereas werewolves, lizardmen, and other beast people, optimized for military service, were not.

These artificial humanoids were called BOUs—Bionic Organoid Units—and they became indispensable to human life. But that in itself became the seed of the next fight. There were people who agitated for BOUs' "human rights," as well as discrete battles over every kind of privilege, from citizenship to the right to engage in business. Add this to an ongoing hangover from the religious disputes of an earlier age, and trouble was brewing behind the scenes of a world that looked otherwise prosperous.

When some of those who embraced BOU rights created a handful of experimental units with reproductive capabilities, other people claimed they had "gone rogue" and began taking it upon themselves to put BOUs to death with some frequency. Violence involving BOUs began occurring around the world.

At this point, humanity was no longer supposed to have to worry about land, water, or food, yet these *-isms* still provided the perfect excuse to start a war, one that came to envelop everyone and everything. The unstoppable force of one side's "justice" came up against the immovable object which was that of the other side. Even

with starvation nonexistent, with poverty a thing of the past, in the end, it turned out war never went away.

Once humans' bellies are full, they start to become veritably obsessed about things that couldn't have interested them less when they were starving. Consider those who would kill someone in real life just to win in a video game. Or collectors who would resort to thievery and murder to get rare items. Or self-proclaimed "do-gooders" who considered it an unqualified pleasure to harass someone so badly online that they committed suicide. Such people existed as far back as the twenty-first century.

Food and money had been replaced by differences in ideology, the refusal to accept the slightest deviation from one's chosen belief system. Disgust at those who did not share one's own views became the reason for people to kill other people. Because they *could* kill. If other people had to die to bring about one's own vision of the world, so be it. In fact, maybe those who disagreed *deserved* to die.

Maybe it was just that particularly ugly side of human nature coming to the surface.

Whatever it was, it threw the world deeper into chaos. Countries emerged and collapsed, businesses boomed before dropping out of sight, religions were born and then disappeared: it was impossible to know which way was up in the world anymore. The nanotech cloud burst with information, far more than any human could comprehend...

"This facility produced military BOUs for the North American Union," Theresa announced, the massive genetic-engineering structure at her back.

"Um, let's just... Could we hold on for a second?" I said. Then I glanced at Minori-san and the others and said, "Am I imagining things, or..."

"What?"

"Or did she just mention, you know, America and China and the twenty-first century and stuff?"

"Don't worry, I heard it, too," Minori-san said.

"Huh. So there are countries in this world called America and China, too. Wow, that is *some* coincidence. Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Shinichi-san..." Hikaru-san was looking at me skeptically. "Stop with the embarrassing escapism and let's face reality."

I froze, my eyes vacant.

America. China. The twenty-first century. Genetic engineering. Nanotechnology.

(*Long pause.*)

So dragons were artificial life-forms created via genetic manipulation and nanotechnology.

And demi-humans? Artificial lifeforms created via genetic manipulation and nanotechnology.

Not to mention...

“That would make magic the product of floating nanomachines, right?” Minori-san said, just what I was thinking. The things we had called sprites, these things that seemed to be found all over this world, were really wild nanomachines. Not incorporeal magical beings. They were scientific creations so tiny they couldn’t possibly be seen with the naked eye. And some of them must have leaked through the hyperspace tunnel over to the Japan side of things.

“Most nanomachines are programmed to gather in areas of dense human population,” Theresa said.

The nanomachines were fundamentally meant to enable networking, and amounts and flow of information are naturally highest where the human population is most dense. So for maximum flexibility, the nanomachines had simply been programmed to migrate to the places with the most information. And when you compared this world with twenty-first-century Japan, the human population was obviously denser in Japan. So the machines had made the trip through the wormhole just like I had, except in the other direction.

“Oh, hey...”

I remembered how, back when we’d visited Japan ourselves, Myusel and I had been involved in a car chase that had been like something out of a movie. For some reason, we’d been able to use our magic without a sprite bottle or even a magic stone. The logic must have gone like this: the nanomachines (read: sprites) that had made it over to Japan had gone to the most populous part of the country, namely Tokyo.

.....

Whaaaaaat?!

You mean all that crap actually made sense?!

“That would mean this isn’t an *alternate* world at all. It must be...”

“A future world, probably,” Hikaru-san said. “Maybe five thousand years ahead of ours, maybe ten thousand. Who knows?”

My brain thundered with the theme song from *Army of the Squids*.



So there it was. I spent a moment with my head in my hands, trying to absorb this shocking revelation.

“Um...” It was Myusel who spoke. “Can I ask something?”

Theresa looked at her with open contempt. According to her explanation, Myusel was basically one of those BOUs or whatever they were, not a creature who ought to be addressing a human being too

readily.

“Please hear her out,” I said. “As a favor to me.”

When I added my voice, Theresa finally sighed and nodded.

“What is it?”

“I don’t really understand the details,” Myusel started hesitantly. She was probably more capable than any other native of this world when it came to speaking Japanese. In fact, she’d managed to hold her own talking to my family. So while the specialist jargon and science-fiction-y terms had probably gone over her head, there was a good chance she understood most of what I had said.

“But Theresa-san... Did *you* cause the earthquake and burn down this city because you were angry that the people of Bahairam excavated and started using this facility?”

“Why in the hell would I do something like that?” Theresa said. “I grant, as overseer of this facility I did purge the feral BOUs, and assign a dozen or so air-assault units to ensure they wouldn’t come back. But that was simply because it would have been dangerous to allow entities outside my control to do as they pleased here.”

Uh, that was logical, I guess. It’s like, if you came back to a building you were responsible for to find it full of stray dogs and cats, of course you would chase them out. Especially if the machinery in the building still worked—it would only be safe. From Theresa’s point of view, the “feral” BOUs, the ones not under her direct supervision, probably weren’t any better than stray animals.

“When you talk about burning down this city, are you referring to those pillars of fire?” she said with a frown. “If so, I’m not responsible for those. Not for the earthquake, either. Those phenomena did originate with this facility, but only because the feral BOUs insisted on fiddling with machinery they didn’t understand.”

“Wha...?”

Come to think of it, this facility—the one Bahairam called the Dragon’s Den—had produced dragons under military supervision. There was no telling how much they really knew about what the place was, but they probably at least grasped that there was equipment here that could create dragons. I guess they hadn’t made it to the second floor, so they wouldn’t have seen the demi-human production lines. They probably couldn’t imagine how dark and dangerous this place really was.

They probably naturally started to ask, how fast can we make dragons? How many can we build? They would have started adjusting settings and trying things out, without fully understanding the facility’s equipment. Maybe after some trial and error, they had figured out how to control things to a certain extent.

But when it came to complex machinery, a little knowledge could

be a very dangerous thing.

“By the time the emergency signal came through and I reactivated, the reactor furnace was already going critical.”

“Huh? Reactor furnace?” That, uh, didn’t sound promising.

“The facility has several methods for dissipating excess energy. The earthquake released quite a bit of it, but it was only going to be a temporary solution. The facility started venting the heat directly to the outside. That’s what’s caused those pillars of fire.” Theresa sounded as calm as if she were talking about the weather.

“Hang on just a second,” I said. “Did you just say *going critical*?”

“I did. And it is. Even as we speak.” Her tone was clipped.

“And what if it *keeps* going critical?” Minori-san asked from beside me, unable to stay quiet any longer.

“The safety mechanisms can only dissipate energy for so long. Eventually they won’t be able to keep up, and, I assume, the reactor will explode.”

“Hrgh...”

A reactor furnace sounded like something that implied nuclear power, or fusion or something. In other words, we weren’t dealing with geothermal power or wind energy or whatever, something where a breakdown in the mechanism would just turn the lights off. Then again, maybe fusion would just stop on its own? I didn’t actually know.

“Um, so, how much potential damage are we talking, here?” I asked, my voice trembling. Maybe we had better run away before we got cooked...?

“Good question,” Theresa said, appearing to do some mental calculations. “That’s a Level 2 Annihilation Reactor in there, so... the stockpile of antimatter provided by the Orbital Confederation ought to have been within strategic guidelines. Even if half of it had already been consumed, if we lost control, I’d say we’d be looking at scorched earth in a thousand-kilometer radius.”

Annihilation Reactor. When matter and antimatter, two opposites, came into contact, the result was pure energy. Antimatter bombs and proton weapons were staples of sci-fi. As I recalled, the amount of energy created when one gram of matter met one gram of antimatter was supposed to be something like three times more powerful than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. So if this reactor had hundreds of kilograms of reactive matter in it, it could be dozens or even hundreds of times more destructive than even a hydrogen bomb. It could spell the end not just for Bahairam, but even Eldant! Heck, maybe the Earth itself could be in danger from this!

“Wh-What do we do about this?!” And why was there even a reactor that size in a facility that was just supposed to be making

living weapons?!

“Ain’t shit I can do.” Theresa shrugged and shook her head. “The protective equipment for getting anywhere near that reactor is gone. Don’t know if the feral BOUs took it, or if someone else did something with it while I was asleep. Either way, with the temps the Annihilation Reactor is running right now, anything—flesh creature like you, artificial body like me—would be burned to cinders within seconds if they didn’t have the equipment. Even if you could do anything with it while it turned you to ashes, you might get ten seconds at best. Not realistic.”

I was completely lost for words—as were Minori-san and Hikaru-san. We were beyond concepts of *safe* and *dangerous* at this point. It would be like jumping naked into a blast furnace.

“That’s why I brought you here,” Theresa said, looking directly at me. “It’s extremely fortunate that you’re around, Kanou Shinichi.”

“Uh... it is?” I blinked. I was more than a little overwhelmed by all this. I mean, just think about it. This might be the world’s last day. I was definitely not the guy you called at a time like that. Not to brag, but my physical abilities, intelligence, and even grades at school were all totally average! I was sure she had me confused with someone else.

Despite my confidence about that, Theresa pointed directly at me and said:

“You ought to be able to stop the annihilation reactor.”

(つづく)

Cont’d...



Afterword

Hullo, novelist Sakaki here.

Recently I've started trying my hand at stuff other than light novels, which is why I decided to drop the "light" from my usual sobriquet. 'Course, I've dipped a toe in video games and anime screenwriting already, so maybe "novelist" isn't quite right, either. I guess "professional talker" and "storyteller" sound a little funny, though.

I'll have to think about it.

But anyway, here we are at *Outbreak Company*, Volume 15. I feel like it's been a while since Volume 14. I mean, it *has* been a while. There ended up being three or four extensions to the publication deadline...

There was a little accident (I mean literally), and my editor-san ended up in the hospital, having surgery, being out of touch, and meanwhile I managed to fall down the stairs and need an x-ray, whereupon they discovered something "wrong" with my elbow, and the doctor ordered me to stop writing. Let's just say a lot happened. I know, none of this technically has anything to do with any of my long-suffering readers who've been waiting for the newest volume... In any event, I'm terribly sorry for the delay.

I've been doing some foreshadowing here and there for a while now, and with Volume 15 I'm finally starting to make good on it. I admit to wondering, as I built up my clues over volume after volume, whether I could really make it pay off, so I'm privately thrilled that I was able to bring it all together. Especially stuff like the reason they were able to use magic in the supposedly magic-less Akihabara during the car-chase scene in the "Japan arc"... It was such a subtle detail I almost thought it wouldn't work as foreshadowing, but I wouldn't have wanted it just hanging there as a loose end.

Anyway...

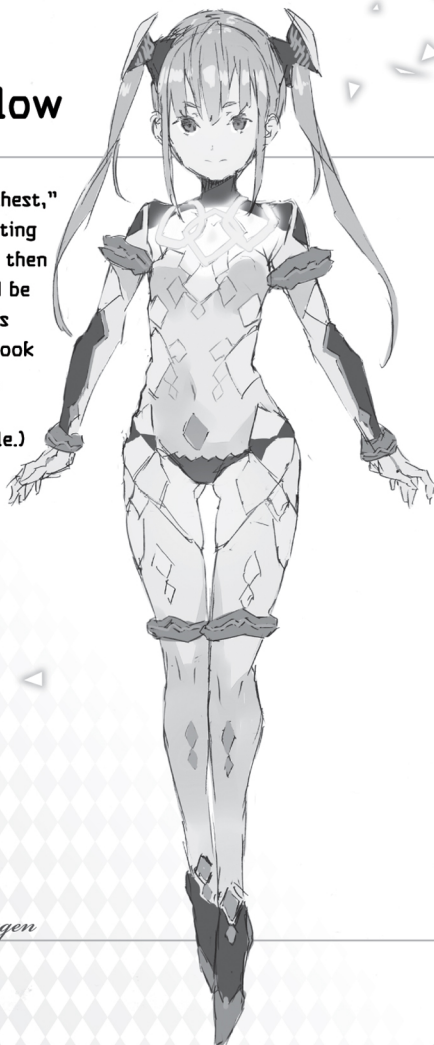
With Volume 15 being the first of a two-part arc, and with the end of the series in sight at that, I hope to get the next volume, and the one after that, out promptly. Hope...

All right, then, I hope all my readers will stick with me to the end of the series. See you in the next volume!

Sakaki Ichiro
26 May 2016

✧Theresa Bigelow

Re: The thing "buried in her chest,"
I thought it might be interesting
to give it visible outlines and then
a translucent shine. It would be
terrific if you could see if this
would be feasible. It should look
a bit like a clear part from a
plastic model.
(It should be raised up a little.)



Outbreak Company By Yuugen

Translator's Notes

Prologue

Move the Capital City

Although in the book, Bahairam's wandering capital is described as a holdover from the nation's more nomadic days, it also sounds a bit like a very old Japanese practice of relocating the nation's capital city each time a new emperor acceded to the throne. The imperial center ultimately settled in Kyoto, then known as Heian-kyo, from 794 virtually until 1868; after the Meiji Restoration, the emperor relocated to Tokyo, where the imperial family has remained to this day.

Chapter One

Super-Dimensional Oscillation Weapon

In Japanese, *chou-jikuu shindou heiki* (the English above is a pretty literal translation). This is probably a reference to the so-called “Space/Time Oscillation Bomb,” a fearsome superweapon from the anime series *Super Dimension Century Orguss*. If the expression “super dimension” rings some bells for you, but they’re related to *Macross*, that’s because *Super Dimension Fortress Macross* was produced by Big West, the same company that created *Orguss*. Although the company would also later release *Super Dimension Cavalry Southern Cross*, as well, none of the series had anything to do with each other beyond the presence of the words “super dimension” in their names. *Macross* and *Southern Cross*, incidentally, would go on to become two of the three anime series spliced together to create *Robotech*, the third being *Genesis Climber Mospeada*.

The Vairocana Buddha of Toudaiji Temple

Toudaiji, in Japan’s old capital of Nara, is technically a complex of temples, but the name is indelibly associated with the *Daibutsu-den* (“Hall of the Big Buddha”), a massive space housing the world’s largest bronze statue of the Vairocana Buddha. Explaining the exact place Vairocana, known as Dainichi Nyorai in Japanese, occupies in Buddhist mythology is beyond the scope of these notes, but in essence Vairocana is understood to represent the Buddha’s “dharma body” (*dharmakaya*, the collective positive or virtuous qualities of a buddha) and/or the Buddhist concept of emptiness (*shunyata*, the understanding that all things exist only because of specific causes and conditions).

Squid Army, Squid Army, No Match For Us

The video Shinichi shows his class plays on two different sources. The scene as described is taken directly from the climax of the 1968 American film *Planet of the Apes*, with Masato standing in for Charlton Heston and the Daibutsu for the Statue of Liberty. At the same time, the title, *Ika no Gundan* (Army of the Squids) reference *Saru no Gundan* (Army of the Apes), a 1974 live-action Japanese TV series that cribbed mercilessly from the 1968 film. (Notably, it was masterminded by Tsuburaya Productions, the studio behind *Ultraman*.) The line quoted above is a direct play on the theme song of this series (which naturally referred to apes rather than squids).

Settings Where Civilization Has Been Destroyed

The references Shinichi reels off include *Nausicäa of the Valley of Wind*, *Fist of the North Star*, *Attack on Titan*, *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, and finally, *Trigun*.

***Foundatio** Trilogy**

The work in question is Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy (*Foundation*; *Foundation and Empire*; and *Second Foundation*, first published between 1951 and 1953). In Japanese, the first novel was known as *Ginga Teikoku no Koubou*, or "The Rise and Fall of the Galactic Empire." Thus, in the source text, Shinichi actually refers to "*The Rise and Fall of the Galactic Empire* and the entire *Foundation* trilogy," but rendering this correctly in English would simply make it sound redundant ("*Foundation* and the entire *Foundation* trilogy"), so we went with just one of the titles.

Zombie Films As SF

Shinichi remarks that even some zombie films are now considered science fiction. Perhaps he's thinking of the fact that over the last twenty years or so, zombie films have featured monsters created by viruses and other biological and scientific (as opposed to magical) terrors. (Consider films like 2002's *28 Days Later*, the 2006 book and later movie *World War Z*, or of course the video game *Resident Evil*, which may have helped get the ball rolling all the way back in 1996.)

Slightly Flummoxing

Shinichi suggests that "SF" stands for "*sukoshi fushigi*" (slightly mysterious).

Clarke's Third Law

Science fiction author Arthur C. Clarke, perhaps most remembered for the novel *2001: A Space Odyssey*, is widely credited with three "laws" about science and future technology. These laws are: 1. When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong. 2. The only way of discovering the limits of the possible is to venture a little way past them into the impossible. 3. Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. This third law, which Shinichi cites in the text, is the best known of the three.

Alchemy

Alchemy is a branch of learning that encompasses, among other things, the attempt to discover a way to transmute (that is, transform)

base metals into gold. As Shinichi says, although alchemy is often associated with magical thinking or rituals, early practitioners of alchemy believed there was a real, meaningful way to accomplish this transformation. It might not be entirely appropriate to describe this as a “scientific” quest to achieve this goal, as alchemy was developed before the advent of what the West would come to know as the scientific method. Prior to that shift in perspective, many thinkers followed classical Greek figures like Aristotle, who classified “natural philosophy,” or the contemplation of the workings of the natural world, as a branch of philosophy. Although Aristotle was a keen observer of the world around him, his thinking was based only on these observations and his reasonings from them; he didn’t engage in the process of formulating and testing hypotheses that would come to characterize later Western science.

G**ver, Bura**oo, or Apocalypse Z***

In order, these are references to: (1) *Guyver* (aka *Bio-Booster Armor Guyver*), a late-80s manga and later anime about a super-powered exosuit; (2) Probably, *Youjuu Busou Buraio* (Mystical Beast Armor Buraio) by a manga-ka named Matsumoto Hisashi; (3) *Kakugo no Susume* (Kakugo’s Progress), known as *Apocalypse Zero* in English. This is a post-apocalyptic series from the mid-90s that featured, among other things, exoskeletons powered by the souls of dead warriors.

The Able Hawk Hides Its Claws

A Japanese proverb, “*Nou aru taka wa tsume wo kakusu.*” It means that if you’re truly skilled at something, you won’t feel compelled to show it off.

MEXT

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. It’s known in Japanese as the *Monbu-kagaku-shou*, or roughly “the Ministry of Cultural and Scientific Affairs.” Even in English, it’s sometimes referred to by its foreshortened Japanese name, the Monka-shou.

Space Carrier

Perhaps a reference to *Space Carrier Blue Noah* (*Uchuu Kuubo Buruu Noa*), an anime TV series that ran from 1979 to 1980.

Mule

A mule is the offspring of a male donkey and a female horse. Because of the genetics of breeding two different species (as donkeys and horses are), mules are almost always infertile. Many inter-species

hybrids (such as the liger) are infertile or quasi-fertile for the same reason. The exact nature of the biological relationship between, say, a human and an elf is naturally somewhat unclear; the Japanese term *shuzoku* can mean “people group” or “tribe,” and while it’s often translated as “race” (as in “fantasy races”), it’s at best only an approximation of the Western European concept of race, in which people groups are separated and evaluated primarily according to skin color.

Chikushooooou

Chikushou is a Japanese curse word that can be variously translated according to context, but is probably a little stronger than *kuso* (crap/damn). In the Japanese, Shinichi exclaims “*Gaddeemu!*” (Goddamn!), and we figured turnabout was fair play.

It Was Both of Us Who Had Cooled Down

The same joke exists in the Japanese: Shinichi says *o-tagai ni atama ga hiete ita*, “both our heads were cooler.”

Don’t Worry, I’m Not Wearing Any

This is a play on the catchphrase of a particular entertainer. He frequently poses, mostly naked, in positions that make it look like he’s not wearing anything at all, but then delivers the line: “*Anshin shite kudasai. Haite’masu yo*” (“Don’t worry, I’m wearing [underwear or something]!”).

Chapter Two

A Yellow Bipedal Load Lifter

A reference to the cargo loader, a massive yellow exoskeleton, that appears in the climax of the movie *Aliens*.

The Land of Fire

In Japanese, *hi no kuni*. (*Kuni* often means “country,” but originally referred to provinces or even simply regions.) This expression sometimes refers to a part of northern Kyushu. Although the exact etymology is debated, most explanations trace the roots of the expression back to the mythical Emperor Keiko, who was supposedly guided to Kyushu by ghost lights known as *shiranui* (“unknown fire”). This phenomenon then lent its name to the area, which became called “the land of fire.” Japan also lies directly in a geological zone sometimes referred to as the “ring of fire” for its extensive volcanic activity.

Thunde*birds

That is, *Thunderbirds*, a 1960s British TV show about a team that uses technologically advanced vehicles to rescue people in trouble. The show was given a distinctive appearance by its use of marionette puppets and miniatures effects. It’s not entirely clear what Shinichi means by “the new series,” as there were several *Thunderbirds* sequels and spinoffs, not least the 1982 anime series *Kagaku Kyuujotai Tekuno-boijaa* (Scientific Rescue Team Techno Voyager), which was localized in the West as *Thunderbirds 2086*. There have been new *Thunderbirds* properties as recently as 2015’s *Thunderbirds Are Go*, and it’s just possible this is the “new series” Shinichi is referring to, as this volume of *Outbreak Company* was published in 2016.

Umi****

A reference to *Umizaru* (literally “Sea Monkeys”), a series about the Japan Coast Guard rescuing shipwreck victims and the like. It started as a manga in the late 90s, and later had two live-action films and a TV drama.

Tomika Her**s

Between 2008 and 2010, a couple of tokusatsu series based on Takara Tomy’s line of toy cars aired in Japan. The series were collectively called *Tomika Heroes*.

Occupation Troops

When the US armed forces occupied Japan after its defeat in World War II, the American GIs were frequently cajoled into giving out candy and other small treats to Japanese youngsters.

The Feather Decoration on a Captain's Unit

In the *Gundam* franchise, the mobile suits of captains and other leaders on the Zeon side frequently have a feather-shaped protuberance on the head.

A Cemetery

Unlike the stout, rounded tombstones that often populate cemeteries in the West, Japanese grave markers tend to be taller and thinner, and therefore closer to the “pillars” of fire Shinichi is witnessing.

Chapter Three

Mushin

As Minori says in the text, this expression means “no mind” or “empty mind.” (The character *mu* means none, empty, or otherwise signifies nonexistence; *shin*, perhaps better known to some readers as *kokoro*, often means “heart,” but here is closer to “mind,” the heart being the apparatus of both thought and emotion in the traditional Japanese conception.) *Mushin* is a common concept in martial arts, where it represents the idea that a practitioner acts without having to think—that is, not thoughtlessly, but prior to thought.

Non-Self

The Japanese expression is *muga no kyouchi*, roughly, “a state of mind in which there is no self.” One of the central aims of much Buddhist practice is to help the practitioner realize that there is no discrete “self” that exists in isolation from other things and people, but rather, all things and people can exist only in relation to all others.

Family Register... Residence Certificate

Every Japanese citizen is listed in a *koseki* or family register that records all the members of a family and details about them, including dates of birth and death, and any marriage. Non-Japanese citizens are generally not entered in *koseki* even if, for example, they marry a Japanese citizen. (Although sometimes such people can be entered as what amount to marginal notes in the spouse’s *koseki*.) The *juumin-hyou*, or residence certificate, by contrast, is a card that every resident of Japan possesses, including non-Japanese citizens.

Your ‘Zines

In Japanese, Petralka uses the phrase *usui hon*, “thin book,” rendered in katakana to make it look especially awkward. This is a slang term for 18+ doujinshi. “Zines” isn’t exactly the same thing, but sounds equally strange coming from her

Rape Laws

(Trigger warning: rape)

Shinichi’s remark was basically true up until 2017. (Volume 15 of *Outbreak Company* was published in 2016.) According to an article from Human Rights Watch dated July 2018: “Until last year’s [2017]

legal reforms, Japanese law defined rape solely as involving violent penetration of a woman's vagina by a man's penis. This prevented many female rape victims and all men and boys who had been raped from seeking justice.”

(Source: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/29/japans-not-so-secret-shame>)

My Dohatsuten

It's just possible this is a reference to a rock band active between the mid-80s and 1996. It's not completely clear whether this is actually an intentional reference to the band, or just something that doesn't make much sense—but as Shinichi apparently doesn't really know either, perhaps it's best not to sweat it.

The Heroine is a Red-Haired Fire User...

A reference to the light novel and later anime *Shakugan no Shana*.

Chapter Four

Did They Cost Six Million Dollars Each?

The Six Million Dollar Man was an American television series that ran from 1973 to 1978. The main character was an astronaut who's nearly killed in an accident, but is saved with the use of expensive bionic components; he then goes on to put his new abilities to use as a secret agent. The title referred to the amount of money it cost to rebuild the main character.

Tokyo Dome

The Tokyo Dome is an iconic structure in downtown Tokyo, a massive stadium perhaps most famous as the current home of the Yomiuri Giants, Tokyo's baseball team. The Dome is often used for other games and events as well, though, and has hosted everything from music concerts to pro-wrestling engagements.

Paradise Lost

Paradise Lost is an epic poem by the English poet John Milton, first published in 1667. In blank verse, it recounts not only the biblical creation story, but also the fall of Lucifer from Heaven to become the devil and, later, the fall of humankind when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden. While the fall of Lucifer as a complete story within the Judeo-Christian tradition is largely a post-biblical development based on a handful of Bible verses (notably Isaiah 14:12), most of the details Shinichi mentions in his description in the book can be found not only in *Paradise Lost*, but in the account of the fall of humankind in Genesis 3.

Legend of the Galact** Heroes

Legend of the Galactic Heroes (*Ginga Eiyuu Densetsu*, referred to in the Japanese text here by the nickname *Gin'ei-den*) was a series of sci-fi novels written by Tanaka Yoshiki. The novels were first published in the early 1980s, and an influential anime ran for almost a decade from the late 80s until the late 90s. The subsequent dialogue between Petralka and Garius in this scene contains references to two characters from the series, Mittermeyer and a character referred to as *majutsu-shi* ("the Wizard"), possibly the "immortal wizard" (*fuhei no majutsu-shi*) or possibly Jan the Magician (*majutsu-shi Yan*, in Japanese).

Astro Boy

Called *Tetsuwan Atomu* (*Mighty Atom*) in Japanese, but known as *Astro Boy* in English, this was one of the earliest and still one of the most famous masterworks of the “god of manga,” Tezuka Osamu. The titular main character was a robot created by a scientist in the image of the scientist’s dead son. Astro Boy, though, had a wide range of useful adaptations, from the ability to fly to a machine gun in his butt. The manga ran from the early 1950s until 1968, and was the basis for an anime, one of the first produced in Japan after World War II and a seminal work in the genre.

ASIMO

In 2000, Honda debuted a robot it dubbed ASIMO (Advanced Step in Innovative Mobility), a humanoid machine that was part of the company’s efforts to create a walking robot. As of 2018, active development on ASIMO was discontinued, though the robot still sometimes makes public appearances.

Mandrakes

The mandrake is a plant with a root that grows into twisted shapes sometimes thought to resemble human infants. This gave rise to the belief that the plant was a living creature; it was said that pulling up a mandrake plant by the roots would cause it to scream, and anyone who heard the sound would die.

Chobos. Pika**us. Koma**ns.**

Here, Shinichi lists a series of cute mascots. Chocobos are from the *Final Fantasy* series, Pikachu is a Pokémon, and Komasan is a character from the *Yo-Kai Watch* franchise.

Self-Reference

In the final illustration in the book, Shinichi can be seen to be pointing at his own face. This is typical in Japan when making a “Who, me?” gesture, where people in the West might be more likely to point at their own chest.







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Outbreak Company: Volume 15
by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by Kevin Steinbach
Edited by Sasha McGlynn

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